

Spring Tides: An Our Flag Means Death Zine VOL. I is a non-profit, charity fanzine dedicated to the HBOMax TV show Our Flag Means Death. All proceeds from this zine are donated to FTNE Pasifika, a Pacific LGBTQI+/MVPFAFF+ focused charitable trust.

TYPEFACES

Monk Gothic, Cormorant Garamond, Trattatello, Hoefler Text Pro Fleurons.

ASSETS

Initial conception and design style by Marina Fraguas. All images and textures taken from Pixabay.

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This project was organised on stolen land. Spring Tides wishes to pay our respects to the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and their elders, past, present, and emerging. Sovereignity was never ceded.

Almy there matey!

Thank you sincerely for purchasing VOL.1 of Spring Tides. Your support means the world to us and TINE Pasifika, our charity of choice.

We started this project to celebrate two things:

- A show that resonated so deeply with those who, for far too long, have waited to see themselves reflected -represented on screen
- And the brilliant, vibrant community surrounding it, all of whom have so much love and passion in their hearts

As much as it was a challenge to coordinate an open-call zine of this scale, it was only right that just as The Revenge welcomes all into its crew, we let everyone, regardless of skill level and experience, express their love for this show.

And by God, the work we put into managing the moving parts of this project pales in comparison to the sheer amount of talent on show. We can't thank our 170+ contributors enough for trusting us with their gorgeous work.

We hope that you enjoy the fruits of their labour, and that you find within these pages even a semblance of what Our Elag Means Death inspired within us: acceptance, pride, joy. Love, shameless, enduring—

From your Captains,
The Spring Tides Mod Team

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Spring Tides: AN Interview with Damien Gerard

AN EXCLUSIVE Q&A WITH THE ACTOR WHO PORTRAYED BLACKBEARD'S FATHER.

no content warnings apply.



Damien Gerard is a classically trained actor with over 25 years improv experience who has starred in various films, TV shows, and games. Damien is a kind and resilient individual, having overcome a serious illness and gone on to pursue acting with more enthusiasm than ever! He is also a proud nerd, writer and tabletop RPG player.

1. What's your perspective on how your character affected Ed, given his role in the 'creation of Blackbeard' so to speak? Were you at all a part of the brainstorming surrounding Ed's relationship with his father?

I think Father Teach affected Ed in ways we don't yet know. In your formative years, a dominant father figure can really shape an impressionable young mind. I hope that if it gets renewed that we get to find out more in season 2.

2. Did you have any specific approach on how you prepared for the role, as Blackbeard's dad is ostensibly the bad guy of the family? Did you create any sort of backstory for him?

The thing about bad guys is that they rarely consider themselves the villain. I always create backstories for my characters. I have a list of 65 questions that I answer before playing a role to help me 'get into character'. It's something my

old acting coach in the UK taught me and it's served me very well over the years. I won't bore you by my process but I find that I get into character best once I learn how to literally walk as the character. So in this role, I walked round my trailer for a while until I 'got him'.

3. Do you see any future explorations into your character, perhaps in a potential season 2? We could definitely see you haunting Blackbeard like the Badmintons haunted Stede!

I would absolutely love to be on season 2 of OFMD. I had such a great time there that it would be great to be back. As for the chances of that happening, well, sadly I have no idea. However, I have had this absolute groundswell of support from the OFMD fans and I'm grateful for every one of them supporting me and lifting me up. I've even heard that one fan has started a petition on change.org to get me back on the show either in the same role or as one of the crew members! I could totally see me haunting Ed too.

4. Did you and the actors playing Young Ed and Ed's mum have to decompress after filming your scenes together?

The two actors who played my family are wonderful people and we spent time chatting between takes. I don't think we had to decompress as they were all so professional and good that I think they just took it into their natural stride

5. What was the general atmosphere like on set? Did you have any favourite behindthe-scene moments that you wouldn't mind sharing?

The atmosphere was incredible. So many passionate, creative, wonderful people. My favourite part was when David Jenkins popped into the set and told me that I was crushing it. I've actually made some permanent friends from some of the crew too. The day we were doing the Kraken scene took place in Studio 29 (I think) which had a lattice-work of rain spouts in the roof. I spent the entire day being bathed in warm rain and it was glorious! The stunt director and the chap who played my stunt double were both fantastically supportive and patient people who showed me how to do low-level wire work, which I had never done before and was a huge bucket list item for me ticked off. Mind you, having my own stunt double was a bucket list item ticked off. As was working on an HBO show. And with Taika. And so on. Basically, it was all I could do not to split my face open from ear to ear grinning with how happy and lucky I was to be on this set, next to some of the most talented actors and crew I have ever had the fortune of working with.

6. What was it like working with the rest of the crew?

The set was busy. And I mean proper busy. There wasn't time for laughing and joking. Yet, they still found time to do it. That, to me, is a sign of a crew that is perfectly in sync with each other, knows where they should be at any given time, how to do their jobs perfectly, and is STILL warm and friendly and supportive. An incredibly passionate bunch of people.

7. Did you do the whole "being swung around by a fake tentacle" stunt yourself? If so, did it take a lot of preparation to achieve?

I did all the low level stunt work. My stunt double did the swinging in the air bits, but the parts where you see me lifted off the ground, and the part where you see me land, were both me. I had a harness strapped over the top of the wetsuit I was wearing under my costume and had one wire attached to my right hip. I started off about two feet off the ground, on a box, being supported by the stunt director and my double, then when the director shouted "action", I 'fell' into the scene, swinging on the wire, and landed on my knees. So much fun!

8. How did you come across this role? Did you expect it to become so big when you auditioned/during production?

My fabulous agent, who I am so lucky to be with, got me the audition, and being that they had previously asked me to keep my 'covid hair', which was now long, thought I was a good fit for the role, especially being British. I had no idea it was going to be as big as it was. Mind you, I had no idea that anyone was attached to it, like Rhys or Taika, when I did my audition. Even then, I wouldn't have treated the audition any different. I throw 100% of me into all my auditions regardless of what channel it's on, who's in it, etc. Once I found out who was in it, I knew it was going to be a hit. Everything Taika touches is gold, in my opinion. I so desperately wanted to be in WWDITS that I was literally jumping round my room with joy when I found out that Taika was in OFMD.

9. What was it like moving to LA? Did something inspire you to make a big change in your life?

I moved to LA in 2015. Back in 2011 I landed a lead role in a US movie that was shooting in the UK. All the crew and the other lead actors were from the US and after spending several weeks with them, they convinced me that this is where I needed to be. Fortunately, one of the agents for one of the US actors came over, saw me and offered to sponsor my visa. It took me a few years of scrimping and saving money before I could make the move, but I

believed in myself so much that I thought the sacrifice of leaving my loved ones and family was warranted.

10. What's been your reaction to all the fan content surrounding the show? Is there anything that you'd personally want to explore in the future in terms of your character?

I am bowled over and completely humbled by all the love and support I've received from the fans of the show. It means more to me than you can imagine. For a while during the pandemic and while I was undergoing chemo and radiation therapy for cancer, I thought my career, and maybe even my life, was over. I wanted to throw myself 100% back into my career once I was able, and to think that my tertiary character was hated by so many people, for the right reasons, makes me realise that I did what I set out to do; create an unlikable character to help show why Ed was like he was. I am blessed to be doing what I do and I want to keep doing that for decades to come. I continue to train weekly on my acting ability and I just know that through my perseverance, and honestly through the love and support of all the wonderful folks out there who lift me up, I will achieve everything I set out to do.

You may find Damien on Instagram, TikTok, Cameo, Youtube, and Twitter with the username @DamienTGerard!



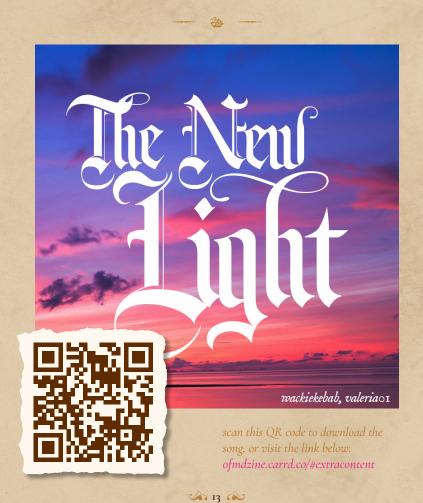




THE NEW LIGHT

WRITTEN & COMPOSED BY JAQUI, VOCALS BY JAQUI & VALERIA, MIXED BY WATSON.

"the moment i saw you... for the first time."



THE ART OF COOKERY

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Roach's Tagine (V)

Orange Glaze Cake (VG, GF)

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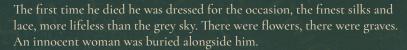




THE MANY DEATHS OF STEDE BONNET

AVELINE

no content warnings apply.



The second time he died it was the middle of the night. No wind and no clouds, he didn't make a sound as he stole away to the sea. He left for her a shovel but he didn't help her dig.

The third time he died there was smoke in the air, and a rope still looped round his neck. He'd never be sure what was real or was not, and he found he didn't quite care.

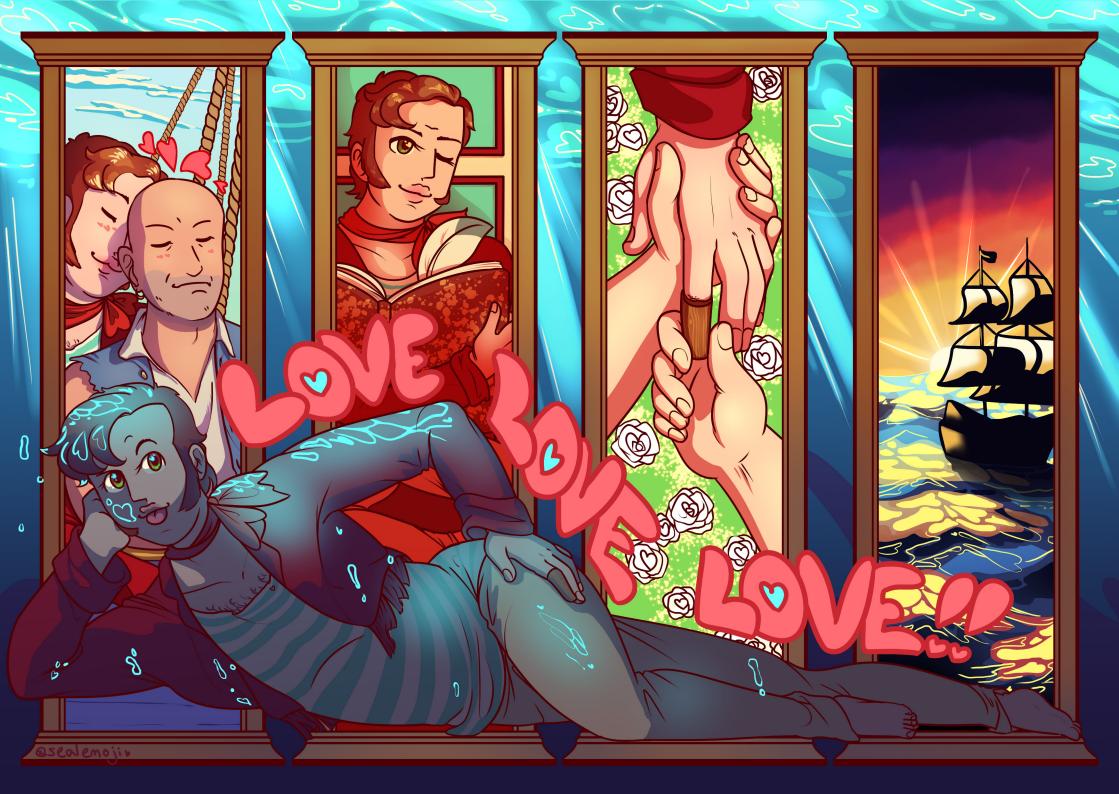
The fourth time he died it was gunpowder and fear, the sharp blade of regret in his gut. He'd left her below and now here he was, digging a grave for the man that he-

The fifth time he died was a careful affair. She'd dug herself free all on her own, and so they both might be free, she helped him down into the grave.

The sixth time he died, Stede Bonnet would do it properly; be it by his side or by his hand.





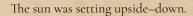




CAPT'N ACROBAT'N

FLIRTYGAYBRIT

no content warnings apply.



Had Ed felt any less comfortable dangling precariously by his ankles from a tangled mass of rope that had bunched up behind the wooden slats surrounding the Revenge's maintop, he would have long ago succumbed to gravity and found himself turned into pirate jelly on the deck below. But seeing as Ed was an old hand at remaining ensnared, dangled, or otherwise imperilled by gravity for prolonged periods of time, he found it rather comforting.

There would be no pirate jelly, and his spine would feel fantastic afterward.

While he waited to be hoisted to safety, Ed found that his new vantage point gave him a spectacular view of the sun sinking into the open sea. Stede's frantic rope—gathering and the gentle rocking of the ship caused Ed to rotate slowly until he faced the setting sun, a welcome sight in the new perspective through which he now viewed the world... but what excited him the most was what he saw when the sun disappeared.

It was brief — faster than a blink! — and Ed knew he'd been the sole witness. Had this spectacular occurrence been viewed by Stede, or Lucius, or anyone else to whom immediate chronicling with flowery exposition was of the utmost importance, it would have caused an immediate uproar. But it was Ed who saw it, hanging upside—down from the mast by his ankles, and he simply found himself staring at the spot where the sea had become sky and the sky had become an ocean of wisping orange—and—purple islands.

Ed had seen such unlikely portents before, all brief instances of magic in a world that he had long since left behind. But this was a new world, and he was a new man. Also, there was so much blood rushing to his brain that it

felt he simply might never cease turning the supernatural beauty of it over in his mind.

If only he could have shared it with someone.

Ed felt himself being raised haltingly at last, but all he could do was think. *I need a plan. No, something better than a plan. A scheme.*

Ed loved a good scheme.

And Stede loved a good sunset.



The next morning brought grey skies. Fortunately, Ed was quite efficient, and had plotted enough to set his scheme in motion over the coming days. It required clever carpentry, ingenuity, muscle, and quite a lot of time spent dangling from the maintop, but when at last a cloudless day promising a spectacular Atlantic sunset arrived, Ed casually sauntered across the deck and cleared his throat.

"Hey. Stede. Come take a gander at this."

The other captain of the Revenge, who was lounging atop a bed of grain sacks with a book in hand, followed the direction of Ed's pointing finger without question, and startled visibly as his eyes fell upon a recently–constructed system of narrow wooden platforms suspended by rope between the main–and foremasts.

"Oh! They're lovely, Ed." Stede squinted upward from beneath the shade of his book. "What are they? They look remarkably like ropes."

"Well, actually, that's 'cause they are ropes."

"Huh," Stede replied, sounding genuinely impressed. "Would you look at that. What are they for, again?"

"They are for a *very* exciting new bit of fuckery I've been working on. I'm calling it the 'easy trap'. Watch this."

Having climbed the mast while he explained, Ed now edged along the small platform at the base of the midmast and carefully slid down a pair of ropes until he reached the wooden plank affixed to them. First he sat on it, then scooted himself backward until the narrow plank was nestled just behind his knees.

Then, just as he'd practised on his own, he let go of the ropes. Knees locked, gravity took hold, and Ed dangled confidently in place.

No pirate jelly.

"Like this!" he called, waving his arms in a grandiose gesture. He swayed like a pendulum on the plank. "See what I did there? Pretty damn impressive, I think."

Far above him on the ceiling that was the ship, Stede's face broke into an upside–down frown. "Well, it's mighty impressive, Ed, but... what exactly does it do?"

"Ah, well, that's the thing. It's designed to let you get the drop on your enemies from way high up. You swing a bit like this, and then higher, like this, and when you're ready to spring your trap you just jump from one to the other, and when they're least expecting it..."

At the end of what was now quite a large arc, Ed reached up with his knife and severed one of the two ropes that tethered the length of wood to the mast; the plank dropped from beneath him, but his momentum carried him through the air toward his target: a second wooden plank suspended from the mizzentop. This he caught by the hands, and used his momentum to swing toward the stern of the ship, where Ed finally dropped the remaining distance to the quarterdeck with a heavy yet satisfying thud.

Stede applauded vigorously, his book lying forgotten on the deck, and Ed felt within his chest a small swell of excitement that had nothing to do with the adrenaline of nearly falling to one's death. "Now that *is* quite a show, Ed! What did you say it's called, again? The Trap–Easy?"

"The Easy Trap, yeah."

"The Trap–Easy. Or, if you like, the Trap–Eze! A truly marvellous name for a truly marvellous act. We should write this one down, I think."

"Yeah, we should." Ed leaned out over the bannister and gazed down at Stede, then gestured to the mast with his knife. "And d'you wanna know the best part? That one there, that's for you."

"For me?"

"Yeah, for you. You've got strong legs, strong arms, and you're a quick learner. It'll be easy. Trap-Eze-y, even."

"Oh! Well, I've never thought of myself as a Trap-Eze artist before, but I suppose I *am* a bit of an athlete. All those lessons in horseback-riding..."

While Stede mused on his physical capabilities, Ed gazed, smiling, at the horizon. It would take time; but eventually, inevitably, the sun would set again. This time, he would be ready.



Stede's ropes required some adjusting, seeing as he'd never spent much time dangling from things and was liable to hurt himself from a fall, but by the first day he'd learned to sit upright on it; unfortunately, a bank of clouds had slowly made its way across the sky, obscuring the sunset for the evening. It mattered little, as Stede was sweaty and complained of feeling like the bones had disappeared in his arms and thighs, so they simply sat on the planks and enjoyed the view.

Thus the Trap-Eze was invented.

They practised regularly, sometimes early before the day grew too warm, and sometimes in the evening after the sun had lost its strength; when the sky was clear, Ed would insist on practising the acrobatic act until the sun sank below the horizon, and would try find a way to draw Stede's eye to the west.

But time and time again, Ed's efforts were thwarted.

Once, it was because a distant ship slid into view, and though Ed hoped that it might change course, it passed before the sun just as it set; on one evening, the sun slipped out of sight just as Black Pete let out the mainsail and nearly sent Ed tumbling to the deck; another time, Olivia the seagull swooped in and alighted on Buttons' head, obscuring the view in the nick of time; one evening even saw one of Stede's ropes snapping, and the sun set upon Ed, dangling upside—down and holding Stede aloft by the arms. Inconvenient though the accident was, it ended up proving to be a pretty sick manoeuvre, and was incorporated into their routine thereafter.

Some nights the sun simply set and did nothing exceptional at all.

The days passed, and the ruse lasted long enough for them to perfect their craft. Stede gained a notable amount of upper body strength and coordination, and Ed even modified his knee brace to allow him to swing Stede from plank to plank and stick the landing. It was a great success — yet despite these results, Ed's plan had failed. He grew dejected, irritable at even the mention of dusk, until one clear evening when Stede, having noticed that Ed no longer even wished to practice in the evening, asked him about it.

And Ed, whose arms and legs felt the burn of a good workout and whose ass ached from the teeny wooden bar on which he currently sat, confessed everything to his partner.

"...I still can't get over it," Stede said at last, once Ed had gone sheepishly quiet. "All of these leg–splinters and rope–burns and minor concussions later, and it turns out the Trap–Eze really was a trap. A Trap–Stede."

The Trap–Eze'd Stede then laughed. "And here, I'd spent all this time thinking to myself, 'wow, does that man ever like sunrises! Likes them so much, in fact, he'd turn the world upside–down to see it.' And that's quite a lot, isn't it?"

Ed kicked a foot and began to swing leisurely in Stede's direction, ignoring the creaking gaff above them. "Sure, I like sunrises. Who doesn't? But what's the sunrise got to do with this?"

"Oh, well" — Stede pointed at the sun, which was currently making its descent — "I suppose if you're upside-down when the sun sets, it must look as if it's rising."

"But if it's already in the sky, where would it rise to?"

"You'd have to ask the ocean that." The small smile that crawled across Stede's face told Ed that he'd been had. Stede's sense of humour, like the man himself, was unique, charming, and often dragged Ed out of his own head; with his cheeks pink from exertion and hair slick with sweat, Stede all but glowed, warm and brilliant in the sun's dusky light — and that alone was worth every bit of effort Ed had invested in this ruse, successful or not. "So where and when can we experience this marvel of nature?"

Ed pointed to where the sun now touched the water's edge, unobscured by cloud, ship, or sail. "There. You don't look directly into the sun, you just wait until it's almost set. Just when it disappears, that's when you can see it."

"And it's beautiful, this thing, you said? More beautiful even than the sunset?"

"Well, maybe. Unless you really like sunsets."

"Oh, Ed, you know I love a good sunset," Stede replied happily. "And look! Here's our chance."

As the sea slowly swallowed up that accursed burning disc, Ed felt the adrenaline of the moment coursing through him. It was imperative that Stede take this seriously. Ed even slowed his swinging and glanced back at the dishevelled acrobat. "Don't look away, man. I mean it. Make sure you watch or you'll miss it."

"Well, how should I know which 'it' to look at?"

"It'll be the most beautiful thing in the sky," Ed insisted, returning his gaze to the spot where the red–gold sun was slipping into its bath. "Right there, see, right there — don't fucking blink, not even for a second — ha! Get a load of that! That's the thing!"

"Oh," said Stede softly, wondrously. "It's magnificent, Ed."

It was there and gone, and Ed whipped around so quickly that he nearly slipped from his wooden seat to discover that Stede was not looking at the horizon, but at him. There was no doubt in his mind that Stede *must* have witnessed the very last moment of the sun's descent, when the final light of day had narrowed to a pinpoint, shifting in colour from molten metal to a vibrant and unmistakable emerald green. "Brilliant, right? Did you see it?"

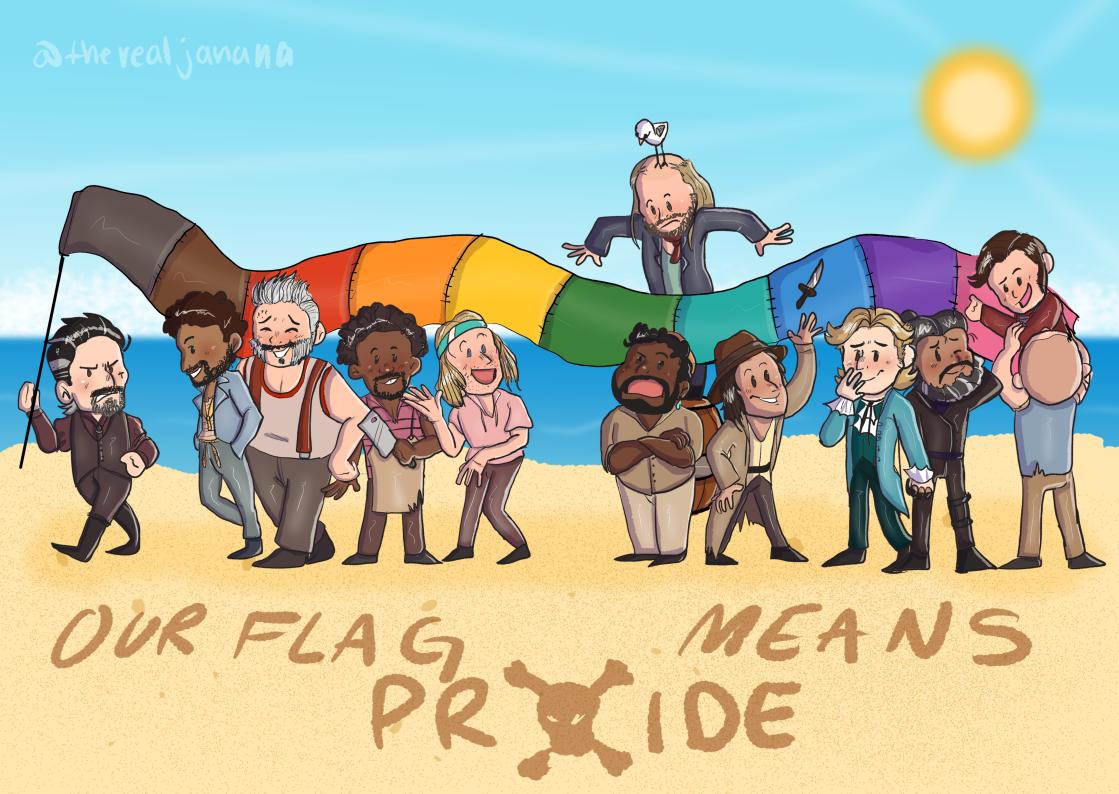
"I think I did, as a matter of fact," Stede said, gesturing vaguely at the space in front of him. "Just over there in the air, wasn't it? Set itself aglow right as the sun went down." He paused, his eyes warm and fond, his smiling face full of radiant satisfaction. "I think you were right, Ed. It was the most beautiful thing in the entire sky."

Ed, triumphant, did a little kick and set himself to swinging again. "Right? I mean, no big deal. But you should see it upside-down next."

Stede set to swinging, too, and once they were perfectly synced, he extended a hand toward Ed — just as they'd always practised — and said: "Actually, I think I'd quite like that."



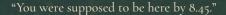




THE CANVAS

AYASHITETSUKO

no content warnings apply



The young man came crashing down the pavement in this busy corner of Soho, London, muttering his apologies, rambling about the breakfast queue being too long. But I knew the face of an idiot who overslept. It looked very much like an apprentice who had left his boss out in the cold winter morning, waiting for his sorry arse to appear and unlock the shop. Even my poor little Airedale Terrier sighed in exasperation.

With shaking hands, the idiot managed to open the door to Hands Tattoo and ran towards the large Victorian—era desk that we used as a reception. It had been months since he began working under my tutelage, but there would still be some time until I could plant any form of competence in his muddy little brain. So I paid no attention to him anymore, just walked past the waiting room sofa towards the stairs with Dog following closely behind.

There would be no activities on the second floor until much later as my team members only took appointments after lunchtime. Here, we divided the space into individual workstations with a bed, a shelf, and a tattoo machine for each artist – with the exception of Jim's as they specialised in hand–poke tattoos. We also decorated the red–painted walls with stencils belonging to each artist, showcasing their unique styles – Fang's tribal works, Ivan's neo–traditionals, and Jim's foliages and forbidden fruits. There was nothing from the apprentice yet as he needed to focus on learning to serve the perfect tea. Perhaps he could try to tattoo a semicolon on a Millennial's wrist, but that was all.

I was thinking about how perfect our current line—up was when Dog's barking reminded me to keep moving to my studio on the top floor.

Once we got there, Dog immediately disappeared behind a desk in the corner, on the hunt for his chew toys. Like the rest of the establishment, I only used antique furniture in my studio. I had also arranged for the workstation to be exactly in the centre of the room, right on top of a Persian carpet.

Unlike the stencils that the others put up downstairs, I had commissioned professional photos of my finished pieces and hung them in high–quality frames. In the daylight, the natural light that hit the pictures beautifully emphasised their texture. Allowing me to be surrounded by proof of my competence – and my clients' refined taste.

I simply believe in taking good care of my work.

I walked over to a full-length, gold-framed mirror to watch the reflection of a man stripping off his coat, jacket, and hat. As he folded up the sleeves of his white shirt, he revealed a collection of images on his arms, marking the different life stages that he had gone through. The man let time touch his hair and beard, leaving traces of grey amongst black, but he kept them neat and tidy.

As I said, I took good care of my work. And dressing up like a proper gentleman was part of it.

In my workstation, I checked the supplies for today's clients, noting the things that were incomplete or missing.

"Frenchie! Bring me gloves and two shading inks! And my coffee!"



"The client is here, sir."

I gave nothing but a mumble at the idiot's announcement. He had to repeat himself one more time before I realised that he was waiting for a response. Too busy to look up, I simply asked him to bring the client to my studio.

"No, I mean here, sir."

I turned in my chair to bark at him for this nonsense, but that was when I saw a man standing beside the apprentice on top of the stairs.

This was the first time I saw the client in person since our email correspondence. Looking at his all-black clothes and salt-and-pepper long hair and beard, one would think of a stereotypical biker gang leader or ageing rock star upon seeing him. But when we shook hands, the sense of eagerness in his dark eyes softened his sharp-edged presence.

"Izzy Hands. Such an honour." His grip was firm.

"Edward, I presume?"

The apprentice used the conversation as an opportunity to escape from my studio, but it did not matter anyway. I pulled a chair for my client, but the man rushed towards my portfolio on the wall instead. "Incredible! Better than I imagined!"

I nodded politely. "Thank you."

Edward waved his hands. "All of these, they're all freehand!?"

"Yes."

Moving from one photograph to the next, Edward continued to marvel at them with a level of excitement that was almost child–like. He asked questions and nodded at the answers, no matter how simple they were, and it took a moment until I could finally get him to sit down. "So, Edward. You would like a back piece?"

He leaned forward. "Yes. The most majestic of them all."

"And how big do we want this to be?"

Edward slapped his own thigh. "Up to you! Money is of no concern. I appreciate art."

I nodded in understanding. Seeing that I got his full confidence, I asked him to take off his T-shirt.

As a freehand specialist, I did not work by slapping stencils to trace on the skins. Instead, I worked as a painter. Often I would have nothing in mind until I saw the canvas in the flesh –and the answers just revealed themselves. My eyes saw the canvases for what they could be while my hands worked their magic, turning potential into reality. Unveiling the beauty under the surface.

Once Edward's top was off, I put on my reading glasses to get a better look. He had work done on his arms, but his back was completely bare, leaving me more than enough room to explore.

This was good news because the back was especially important. They say that the eyes are the window of the soul, but it was the back that reveals the full complexity of a human being. Their pain, the weight they carry. The strength they are exhibiting (or hiding).

In Edward's back, I discovered the beast that was lurking within, one that

was unlike the joyful disposition he had been displaying. It wanted to come out. It had been waiting for me to bring it out.

"Do you mind if the tattoos go all the way to your shoulder and ribcage?"

"Oooh. Sounds delightful."

So I uncapped a marker and started drawing on his skin.



Edward lay on the sterilised and plastic—wrapped bed; the lights shone on the red and green lines that I had drawn on his bareback. We started this ritual from his right shoulder. My hands —wrapped in black nitrile gloves—stretched the surface of his skin as the needles began to dance beautifully, leaving their permanent mark.

There was no other sound but the buzzing of the machine and the singing of Billie Holliday from the speaker. Occasionally, my canvas groaned in pain. This seemed to intensify as I moved to his ribcage.

"This is spicy." was his thought on the experience.

"As expected," I said. "You can have numbing cream, of course."

"No, no! No need! God, no. I can handle this. It's fine," Edward rambled on. "And I get to see your dog from here! Goodness, he's so cute. Can I take pictures with him? After this?"

"Feel free to ask him."

"What's his name?"

A smile grew on my face. "Dog. As in, a dog."

"Fuck me."

Edward let out a string of profanities; I was not sure if he thought the name was a good or bad idea. So I told him that it was just a practical move as I would always see Dog as The Dog. Any other name would be pointless.

I thought that was the end of it, but it turned out that Edward still had questions for me. "Anyway ... I'm curious."

"Uh-huh."

"You're a tattoo artist. Why do you dress up like a lawyer?"

This question was so absurd that I had to lift the needles and pause my work

just so that I could release my pent-up chuckle. But this only made him even more insistent until I finally gave him an answer: "To intimidate people."

I was only half-joking at this point.

"Well. That explains it." Edward nodded. "But maybe you should reconsider this strategy. People might end up falling for you instead."

I shrugged, trying to get back into my work again. "It's worked so far."

"Hm! I guess so. I'd love to see you in a T-shirt, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah. T-shirts. I'd love to see you in one. Think you'd look great."

My mouth fell open. My head was flooded with words and visuals and all sorts of movements, ready to respond, debating each other for control over my tongue. Luckily, even as my thoughts struggled, my fingers were able to maintain their steady pace. Especially as we were only a few lines away from completion.

When we were finally done, I took a deep breath before I let myself apply the foam and wipe them clean off Edward's skin.

My canvas said nothing as I helped him get up, and his expression remained flat as he walked up to the mirror. He kept quiet at the sight of his reflection, at the Kraken on his back — with its head on his right shoulder and its tentacles reaching all the way to the front of his ribeage.

But from the fire in his eyes, I knew that it had awakened something inside of him.

And it was I, the artist, who had brought it out for him ...

"This is beautiful."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it."

The rush in my blood only quickened when he turned to give me a hug.

Outside of the shop, once the boring administrative things were done, I took the time to say goodbye to my client. The air was getting colder despite the midday sun; I had to hide my hands in my pocket to stay warm.

Part of me wondered what to have for lunch, another part wanted a smoke break in a nearby alley. Luckily, a greater part was completely present in the conversation, gazing straight into Edward's eyes as we ended the first day of our collaboration.

"So, see you next week," Edward muttered, fiddling with a paper bag that contained the tattoo balms he'd just purchased.

"Yes. Same time. We'll continue with the shading."

The man nodded solemnly. "Is Dog going to be there?"

"He has nowhere else to be."

"Perfect. I'll see you two then."

We shook hands with the camaraderie of two gentlemen; after a slight pat on the shoulder, we separated and wished each other a good day. Edward turned and began to walk away, his paper bag swinging happily in his hand ...

Until he stopped in his tracks. "Ah, Izzy?"

"Yes?"

He turned towards me and gave me a wink. "I'm serious about the T-shirt."





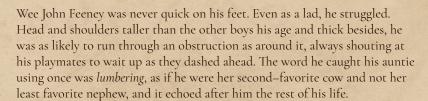




GRACE AND GRATITUDE

LOUCIFERISH

no content warnings apply.



It was the first time he'd found himself compared to livestock, but far from the last. In his gawky adolescent years, he was likened to a bumbling ox.

Later, a sprawled, drunk pirate in a random tavern in Nassau would squint up at Wee John — and up, and up — and slur out, "Ye're a great bleedin' boar of a man, ain't ye?"

"Boar is a good one," Frenchie said when John retold the encounter some years later. The bard was perched on a barrel on the deck, tuning his lute, one leg folded up and the other dangling, long and lean. His heel kicked the wood, beating it steady and hollow like a drum. "Boars are dangerous, at least."

When he looked up from his instrument, his dark eyes flashed with intrigue. "They've murdered kings, you know."

John made an interested noise and lowered himself slowly to the deck at Frenchie's feet. "What kings?" he asked, setting his back to the barrel. Frenchie's toe tapped John's arm as he launched into the tale. They'd been on board *The Revenge* for weeks, but Wee John had never spoken to Frenchie — not *really* spoken to him — until the flag day. The needle felt like an old friend between John's thumb and forefinger, but different, smaller than he remembered. As he pulled thread through fabric, slow and even, he frowned down at the sharp slip of silver.

His mum had been a small woman, a pretty little thing even with her hair grey and wiry and her face lined with worry. Her fingers were nimble, light and rhythmic when she worked, whether it was mending a ripped seam or picking out intricate embroidered flowers on a bodice. John had watched for years from the floor beside her feet, fascinated by the easy movement of her hands in contrast to the way she walked — slow and shuffling, one leg withered by childhood illness forcing her to lean on a stick.

He'd been about seven the first time she'd dropped a ripped stocking into his lap and told him to show what he'd learned in all his watching.

"You're really good at that," Frenchie said, voice low and warm. He leaned across the table, and Wee John glanced up from his work. The needle's point pressed into his fingertip, but he hardly felt it.

"'m not," John protested. "But thanks. I like your cat." Frenchie had a smile that barely curved his lips but wrinkled his eyes, sly and slow, and it wasn't unlike a cat, lithe, and secretive, and blinking in the sun.

Frenchie's hands were moving quickly, stitches uneven but fingers nimble, dancing along the fabric's edge, and John flexed his own hands, remembering. "I used to be better than this," he admitted. "Fingers were a lot smaller back then."

"Really? Even smaller than this?" Frenchie stretched his hand to its full extent. His fingers were slim and long and light, as Wee John expected them to be, belonging to a musician. He put his own hand out in turn, hovering under Frenchie's, and noted the differences, the scars, the contrast in their skin tones.

"Aye," he murmured, and Frenchie broke into a grin as he eyed John up and down.

"Hard to believe, mate."



"I can be a witch," Frenchie declared, prompting a groan from Jim. "What? Witches are scary; right, Johnny?"

John hadn't been paying attention, if he were honest. He was deep in his own head, trying to come up with his own suggestion for their fuckery, but when he'd delved into his own fears, he got — the other boys running away when you asked to join a game, ripping your clothes in town because you outgrew them too fast, tripping over your own feet in an important moment and everyone laughing. And those things were terrifying, no doubt. The very idea raised chills on his skin. But he wasn't sure how that would go over in the plan.

Frenchie nudged him, and John bobbed his head on cue. "Oh, aye. Terrifying." He could tell he'd got the right answer when Frenchie beamed.

"You can be my cat," he declared. It was a simple enough suggestion, but it hit John like a blow right to the center of his chest.

"Me?" The word emerged quiet, carried on a breath, and Frenchie raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, smiling as he scrubbed a hand through his curls.

"If you want to be. That way we're a matched set. Unless you've got your own idea?"

Wee John shook his head quickly. The others were chatting all around them, suggestions bouncing off the wooden walls and shouts of excitement as particularly good ideas hit home, but John's own mind was a blank ledger.

Cats were lithe, graceful, light and quick in their fury when they lashed out. Wee John was none of those things, not for a day in his life. He was no cat, but it was clear in every inch of Frenchie's warm smile that the other man believed he could be. John ducked his head, smiling, and curled his fist in the center of his ratty shirt. Him, a cat.

He'd have to be the scariest cat anyone who set foot to the *Revenge* had ever seen.



John felt as if he hadn't stopped smiling since he and Frenchie stepped into their room. Their room. It was still unbelievable to say, or even to think. He walked around the ship for days after, head ducked, smile growing wider every time his toils took him past that little slip of deck where he'd been sitting when Oluwande gave up the space.

Because it was him who'd turned them into room people, really — John, just as much as Frenchie — and out of all the ways to happen it was because for the first time in his life, lumbering Wee John was quick on his feet. It

was easy, in the moment. He'd seen The Swede running down the stairs, seen Frenchie dashing after him, and all it took was a well–placed leg at the right time

Never in his life had John had a space to himself like this — well, not to himself, but Frenchie didn't count as a negative in the same way others did. Sharing a single room with his parents and siblings had meant listening to their rows, and sprawling on a deck with the rest of the crew meant no filter at all for the many tones of snore and mutter and fart, no shelter from the gulls screaming, nowhere to put his things that they wouldn't have unwelcome hands rubbing over them at any moment.

But Frenchie wasn't like that. Frenchie saw John plucking at the hair on his favorite doll, sitting on the bed he'd claimed for himself and only smiled, shuffling closer, and asked, "Can I sit here?" even though the room belonged to both of them. The bed still belonged to Wee John, and Frenchie acted like that *meant something*.



"Hey, babe, do you mind?"

John raised his head, the 'no' already on the tip of his tongue, because he never minded Frenchie calling him whatever he liked, whether it was *babe*, or *dear*, or *kitty*, or *big guy*, even though the latter had been used against him as quick and easy as a whip by others. When he glanced across the room, he found Frenchie with his legs folded up on the bed, damp boot heels making a spreading stain on his own sheets, and his lute cradled in his lap. His fingers brushed the strings.

"Nah," John said, as planned, though the topic had changed. "If I minded a bit o' music, I wouldn't have bunked with you, would I?" He paused, wondering if he ought to return the favor, add *babe* to the end of the question, but Frenchie was already grinning and plucking at the strings.

"Cheers," he said before launching into an easy, jaunty melody that had Wee John smiling down at the mending that spilled over his knees. He didn't recognize the tune — might have been one of Frenchie's own — but it was sweet and cheery enough to have him wanting to sing or clap along. His fingers busied with patching a hole in Roach's favorite shirt, he settled for tapping his toes along with the beat instead, bobbing his head when the song twisted back to a rousing chorus.

"You could dance, if you wanted," Frenchie said, words bursting through the

song's spell. When John looked up, Frenchie nodded down at his bouncing, socked feet. "No one here to stop you, or mind."

Wee John looked back down at his own feet. The socks that were next on his sewing list were grey as a storm cloud, and his crooked middle toe poked out through a tear in the right one. "Can't. Can't dance."

"'Course you can."

"Can't," John repeated. "Can barely even walk right, babe." He tried the word out. It was sweet on his tongue, like fallen fruit plucked from the base of a tree — so, so sweet it hurt, didn't taste quite right, burned his throat, but it was tempting still.

It turned bitter when Frenchie stopped playing and set his lute aside. He stood, but he didn't storm out like John expected, didn't throw a fuss or laugh in John's face. Instead, Frenchie put his hands out, brown fingers beckoning toward his bowed legs and slim hips.

"C'mon," he said. "I'll show you."

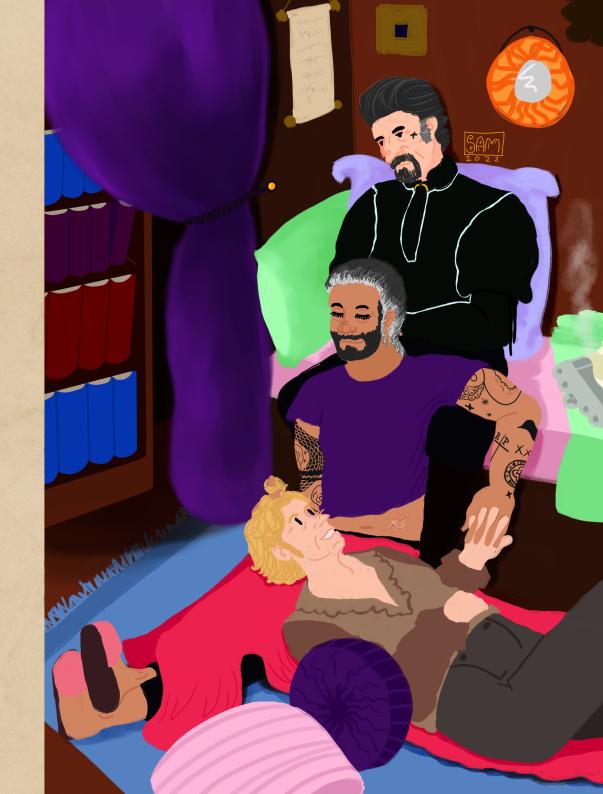
And Wee John owed the mending back to Roach if he wanted his extra helping at supper, but that was an hour off yet, maybe two, and there was no knowing how long Frenchie's offer would last, and so John set the needle and thread aside and let Frenchie take his hands, leading him to his feet and the single, stumbling step it took to reach the center of their narrow room.

"Like this," Frenchie said, bouncing, up on his toes in a jig that brought his heels down in a beat. His warm palms never left John's, their fingers intertwined, and it was all John could do to watch him, dancing brown eyes and bright grin, and twist to keep up so he'd never lose sight of that feeling.

"There you are, my dear," Frenchie said softly, warm, like John had just presented him with the best treasure from a whole pile. "Brilliant."

And Wee John Feeney, dancing, grinned back and clutched his roommate's hands tighter, knowing without that anchor he might float away, out of the ship and off, beyond the horizon.



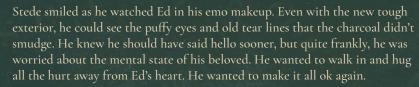




YOU WEAR FINE THINGS WELL

ATLAS BOOTH

no content warnings apply.



He had known that they were in different places in the relationship. Ed was so ready for forever to start and Stede just wasn't yet. So, he did what he did best: run. From one place that didn't want him to the next. This time, this time, someone had wanted him though... and he still ran. But this time, this time he came back.

He held a light blue long stem rose out in front of him; a soft, old piece of satin tied carefully around it. He had caught the deep red satin floating in the tide next to all the books he looted. Well, he figured he could always get more.

Smiling, he laid it down on the dingy attached to Ed's ship. He still wore fine things well.





OUR FLAG MEANS NAPS

KELLAN B

no content warnings apply.

"Aha! There it is!"

Frenchie charged at the flash of movement, bringing down the cannonball in his hands where the intruder had been just a moment before. But now, his weapon collided with nothing but the wood of the deck.

Wee John, however, used the attack to lunge at the creature from the other side of the cannon. Well, it was more a flop in the general direction than it was a lunge, but it did the trick, and he grabbed the furry stowaway in his hands.

"Got it!" He cried. Then he looked to see what he caught.

They had expected a rat when they first heard the scrabbling and scratching. There were always a few rats on the ship, especially right after they left port, which they had done the day before in this instance. After they'd been at sea for a while, though, the number of rats tended to decrease, as Roach used whatever meat they had on hand to make their meals...

But this was no rat. This was a kitten.

"Well done, mate!" Frenchie cried after dropping the cannonball and coming over to partake in their victory. Once he saw the kitten, though, he quickly drew back in fear. "That's a fucking cat!"

"I know. What do we do with it?" Wee John looked back and forth between Frenchie and the kitten, who still tried to claw its way free from his hands.

"Throw it overboard or something! We can't have it here."

"I know you don't like cats, but it's just a little thing. I can't throw it into the sea. It'll drown."

"It's not *just* a cat," Frenchie hissed, "it is an ill omen and will conjure a maelstrom that will suck this entire ship down into the depths and into another dimension. It's just science. Besides! Since cats are witches, and witches always float in water, it'll float, so that won't be on your conscience."

Wee John pondered those words for a moment and shrugged. He didn't know enough about witches to dispute Frenchie's words.

Frenchie threw his hands up in the air and began to walk away. "Just get rid of it. I don't want to stand here any longer. I can feel its evil seeping into my bones."

Once Frenchie was gone, John took another look at the kitten. It had stopped trying to scratch its way loose, and now it instead offered up a pathetic meow, a plea for its freedom.

"Are you really a witch?" He asked it. "You're too cute for that. Or maybe that's just what you want me to think?" He eyed the cat carefully, but it only meowed again in response.

Wee John stood. "Alright, well, I'm afraid you can't stay here. And since witches float, you'll be fine."

He held the cat out toward the edge of the boat and froze. It was just so damn adorable. It was grey with black stripes and had fluffy fur that stuck out every which way. Wee John didn't know much about animals, but it couldn't be particularly old, and it had probably wandered aboard when they made port. Now it was stuck on the ocean, alone.

He *couldn't* just throw the thing overboard. Even if it could float, the waves might get vicious, and it wouldn't make it. It didn't seem fair.

"I can't let Frenchie see you," he whispered to the cat as he drew it back in toward him, cupping it close to his chest. "Or Roach. I need a place to keep you, just for a little while..."

Wee John found himself at Oluwande and Jim's room, knocking on the door with one hand while holding onto the kitten with the other. The cat had since stopped meowing and instead settled into his palm; it was so small that John could hold it easily with just the one hand.

"Yeah, what is it?" Olu opened the door and stepped outside.

"I have a favor to ask, and I didn't know where else to go."

Olu nodded. "Sure, mate, what is it?"

"I need you to keep this kitten in your room until the next time we go ashore."

John held out the kitten and it greeted Olu with a meow.

"I don't understand what's going on."

"Me and Frenchie found this little guy on the deck. He was scampering around, and we thought it was a rat. Anyway..." He sighed. "Frenchie told me that because cats are witches and ill omens that it would cause the ship to sink so I should throw it overboard, but I couldn't do it. Look at it, it's just a little kitten! So, I figured that I would keep it until the next time we make landfall and drop it off then. But I don't have anywhere to keep it."

Oluwande nodded skeptically along with John's explanation. "And you want me to keep it in the room until we make port."

"Exactly."

He shook his head, pondering the consequences of such an action, and Wee John made to interrupt his thoughts before he could refuse.

"Please, Olu, Frenchie will never forgive me if he finds out I didn't get rid of the thing right away. And if Roach finds out about it, you know he'll cook it up."

"You're right, give it here."

John knew that the threat of eating the cat would win Oluwande to his side.

"Appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah, alright." With that, Olu took the cat from Wee John and made to reenter his room.

The cat looked back at John and gave another sad meow before the door shut and it was gone.

"All done?"

Wee John practically jumped out of his skin when he bumped into Frenchie on his way back topside.

"Yup, all done. No witches here."

He figured that Frenchie would see right through his lies, but the power of his relief distracted him.

"Thank goodness. It was only a matter of time before it summoned its demon brethren and they took over our bodies."

Wee John furrowed his brow with confusion. "I thought it was a witch, not a demon?"

"There's a considerable amount of overlap usually."

Gratefully, they were called to the deck by the captain a few seconds later, so John didn't have to worry about maintaining his lie, at least for the time being.

However, he couldn't keep the creature from his mind. He thought about it while he worked, and it even kept him from sleeping. He tossed and turned in his hammock, wondering what would become of the little kitten.

The next evening, he found himself back outside of Oluwande and Jim's room, knocking on the door once again.

"What?" Oluwande called.

"It's John."

There was a flurry of movement and then the door opened.

"You have to take the cat back," Olu said, holding out the kitten for John to take.

He gathered the furry animal in his hands and stared at it confusedly. "Wait, what?"

"Jim and I don't know the first thing about taking care of cats. It shit all over everything."

"I thought you said Jim was, like, a cat person."

"No, I said Jim was like a cat, not, like, a cat person."

"Oh..."

"It can't stay here, mate, I'm sorry."

"What am I going to do with it?" Wee John asked, terrified for the fate of the critter.

Oluwande sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. I don't want it dead either, but..."

Before either could come up with another solution, they heard footsteps on the stairs. They both turned to face the noise, and Wee John hastily held the cat behind his back.

"Ah, Oluwande, Wee John," their captain called as he emerged. "Don't suppose you've seen Mister Buttons?"

"Last I saw him, he and the Swede were down with Roach in the kitchen," Oluwande answered.

"Thank you." For a moment, he was about to leave, but then Stede turned back, examining their posture.

"What do you have? What do you have behind your back?"

"Nothing," Wee John lied.

Despite his words, the cat let out a pathetic meow that echoed through the wooden passage.

"You have a cat?"

Olu sighed and started to step back into his room to avoid being a part of this conversation, but he knew it was too late. John, meanwhile, moved the cat around to his front and held it out for the captain to see.

He looked between the animal and Wee John. "Where did you get it?"

"I think it snuck aboard when we were at port."

"May I?"

"Yeah, 'course, Captain."

Stede took the kitten from John and held it up to examine it, smiling all the while. "Yes, aren't you just a fuzzy little fluff! You're adorable!" He looked at John and Olu. "Can we make him the ship mascot? I've been thinking that we could use one of those. Wait, is Frenchie going to be okay with that? I know he's got a *thing* about cats. Oh well, he'll get over it."

"Jim and I have been calling him Big John," Oluwande offered as the captain continued to coo at the cat.

"'Big John'? Really?" Wee John asked.

"It's kind of funny."

"No, that's actually really funny, I can't complain."

"Frenchie is going to kill you, though," Olu said just to John.

"I'm so dead."

Before he could worry about his fate, though, Stede was walking away with the cat and making for the main deck. "I'm going to introduce Big John to the crew!"

John and Olu followed him. "I have a request: please give me a funeral, if there's enough left of me after Frenchie finds out what I did."

"You got it."

"Everyone, gather 'round!" Captain cried. "I would like to introduce our new ship's mascot: Big John!"

"What is that thing still doing on the ship?" Frenchie cried.

"Are we going to eat it?" Roach queried, ignoring Frenchie's outburst.

"No, we're not going to eat it!" Stede shouted. "It's our pet. We will keep it and be nice to it. No eating, no kicking, no yelling. I think it will be good for all of you to learn to care for something so gentle."

"I'm sorry," Wee John whispered as he sidled up to Frenchie. "I couldn't do it. I know you say it's a witch, but I just couldn't."

Frenchie patted John on the shoulder. "It's okay. It is pretty cute. But when it attracts the lightning storm that incinerates the ship, I will blame you with my last breath."

"That's fair." John let out a sigh of relief. He was just glad that Frenchie didn't hate him for not throwing the kitten overboard.

While they reconciled, the captain was still speaking, teaching the crew the basics of caring for a pet, starting with what a pet was in the first place. Big John had started to fall asleep in his hands even as Stede gesticulated with him.

"Hey, Frenchie, didn't you make a cat flag earlier?" Black Pete questioned when there was a brief lull in the explanations.

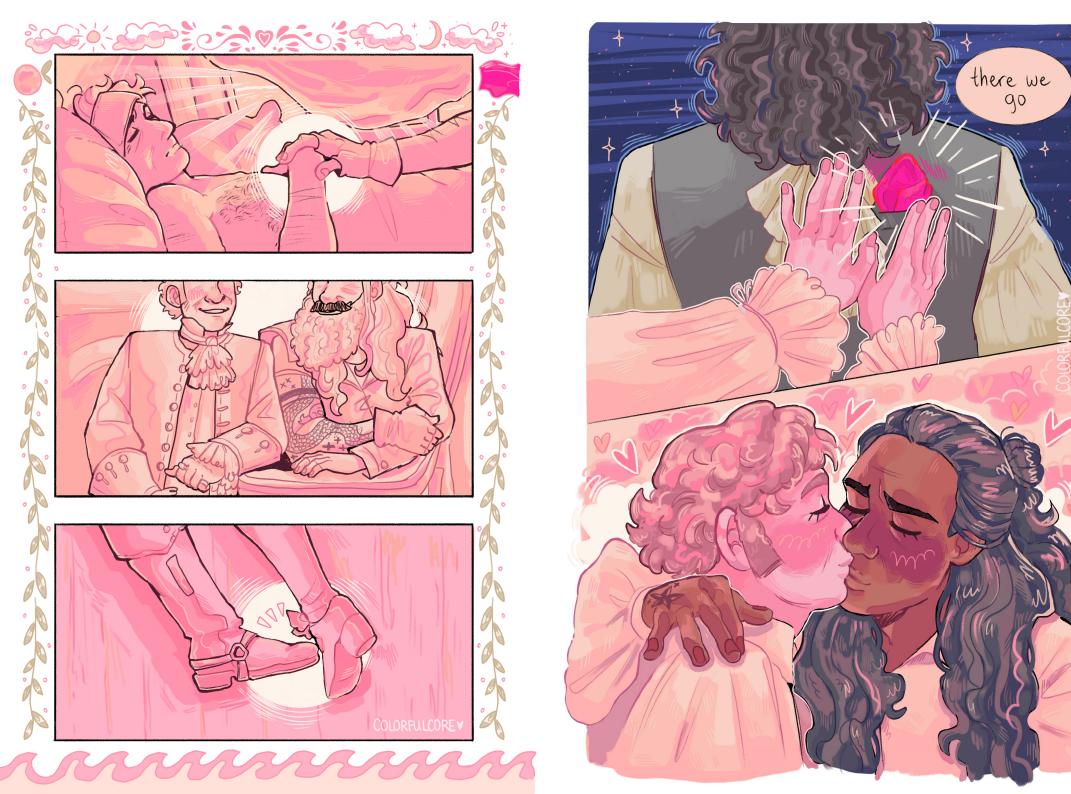
"Yeah, what of it?"

"You could make another one. Put this little guy's face on it or something."

"What, a depiction of our new mascot? That's not scary. That's just, like, 'our flag means naps.'"

The crew started to bicker, as they often did. The Swede remarked that maybe things didn't always need to be scary, while Frenchie pointed out that the very point of the flag was to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, and Roach asked again if they could eat the cat. In the midst of it all, Big John yawned and settled in for a nap of his own. Whether or not he was a witch, he'd made himself at home, and the crew would just have to get used to that.





MEET YOU STAGE LEFT

WRITING BY BUNNY, ART BY KATIA

no content warnings apply.



Edward dreaded this time of year — don't get him wrong, spending his summers at a small town theater always seemed like a vacation compared to his fall and spring seasons spent in big cities, with mountains of costumes to design, construct, and alter in such a short period of time. The part he dreaded was collaborating with the irritating wig and makeup department he'd oh so come to love (cue eye roll) over the past few years; to be fair, he mostly had a problem with the head of the department at the theater, not so much the rest of the crew, but she kind of soured the experience for everyone.

So when Ed arrived at the theaters' shared costume/wig shop for the start of the summer season, he was surprised to find no sign of the evil witch that made him miserable every summer season, but instead a rather fascinating looking man taking out wig heads from their storage boxes. Ed took a moment to study him, watching his hands carefully inspect the canvas heads, then gently placing them on the shelf that was almost too tall for him to reach. He was placing the last one in its spot when the whole shelf came crashing down in front of him, the flying heads just barely missing him. Ed held back a snicker at the face the guy made when he looked at the mess in front of him — he should probably go help him.

"Sorry about that mate, I've tried putting that shelf back three times already. I think it's a lost cause," Ed said, walking into the man's line of sight. He seemed startled, then embarrassed to have been seen in this awkward situation.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry, I didn't know. I can try fixing it again if you'd like me to?" He seemed almost too remorseful for this dumb shelf, Ed thought, but

it was refreshing to talk to someone other than that devil of a woman this man had replaced, who hadn't an ounce of compassion in her whole body. He looked Ed up and down before innocently asking, "Are you part of my crew?"

Ed gave a light chuckle before replying, "Oh no, I'm costumes. Our crews don't get here until next week — when rehearsals start. It's just us shop heads here this week. I'm Ed." He extended his hand to the man, the other's being incredibly soft compared to the rough and peeling skin on Ed's fingers from all the times he'd poked them with needles, pins, and scissors.

"I'm Stede, great to meet you!" he said, giving Ed's hand a firm shake, "how long have you been working here?" Ed gave another small laugh, thinking about how many years he's spent in this studio, with two different crews inhabiting the same tiny space, a challenge for both teams. "Too long — I'm probably going on season 10 this summer? To be honest, the woman you replaced was getting to be too much to tolerate, I was thinking about calling it quits after this season," Ed confessed to Stede. He looked apologetic at the confession, quickly adding, "I'm sorry my predecessor spoiled the space — it seems like such a lovely place, especially to be this time of year."

Ed noticed the way Stede twiddled his delicate fingers when he spoke, never breaking eye contact as he gave Ed a warm smile. It made Ed feel shaky the way Stede carried himself — too kind for his own good. It gave him a weird sense of protectiveness over the man he'd just met minutes ago, hoping no one had ever abused his benevolence. Nevertheless, Ed quickly decided he was excited to share a space with wigs and makeup, if it meant he could see Stede everyday. He was totally hooked on him already.



The next couple of weeks Ed and Stede had spent together in the shared shop had been one of the best times Ed ever had. He was almost afraid of how quickly he'd taken a liking to Stede, normally being the kind of person who did his best to keep people as far away as possible. But there was something about Stede that made him so easy to be around; he was very particular about little things, like the hairsprays and brand of alligator clips he used, but also so incredibly patient with people. Not to mention, actually working together was a breeze.

Ed thought Stede was incredibly talented, always wanting to watch him work when he wasn't busy. Admittedly, Ed never really had an interest in hair and makeup and much preferred working with fabric. His mind wasn't really changed until one morning, Ed found Stede in the studio particularly early,

already knee deep in his project. He peered over Stede's shoulder, who was so focused he hadn't even realized someone had entered the room.

"What're you working on there, mate?" Stede practically screamed in surprise, which Ed should've expected, but found it funny anyway. After a moment, Stede started laughing at himself, which Ed found absolutely adorable. "You startled me! You're lucky I didn't stab you with my hook!" Stede said, carefully placing his tool on the table, "If this gets stuck in you, it's not particularly fun to get out." Ed took the hook to examine it — it appeared to be a bent needle–looking thing with a barb on the tip, and yeah, it didn't look too fun to be stabbed with.

"What's this for?" Ed asked, looking at it from all angles and handing it back to Stede. He took the hook and motioned for Ed to watch him work. Stede had a wig on a head block, the lace on the front held down by a bunch of tiny red pins, "I have another project I'm working on for next season — I'm tying the front hairline for this wig. You use the hook to tie the hair on the lace, see?" Ed watched as Stede took individual strands of hair and tied delicate knots on the lace with the bent tool. It was actually really impressive to Ed, everything he was working with seemed so tiny and fragile, and Stede seemed so excited about his work. It was amazing how effortless he made it look too; Ed was sure it wasn't easy work, but Stede worked quickly and meticulously.

"It's quite fun actually, a bit like crocheting! It takes a while to finish of course, but the result is lovely!" Stede spoke while he worked, Ed noticing a good chunk already seemed to be finished. Stede continued to work, humming a little tune to himself, obviously in his own world. He always had a smile on his face — Ed wondered how his cheeks never got tired from it, but felt elated to bear witness to it for hours on end. Even when his crew would approach him with issues, his smile didn't falter. It was practically contagious, as Ed found himself grinning at his work and humming little tunes. Ed even thought to himself, "I'm in too deep."

The last few weeks of the season were much busier than the first, as the show openings began to approach. Ed found himself in a bit of a sour mood, not getting to spend as much time chatting with Stede, but instead sewing furiously, trying to finish some alterations that were needed from the final fittings. Ed was hoping to finish the rest of the "alts" early enough in the day that he could spend the rest of it peering over Stede's shoulder and maybe (just maybe) gauge his interest in him.

Ed had never been interested in anyone for this long, and honestly thought the initial fascination would wear off after a while. But he actually found himself more enamored by Stede than when they first met. The little things like the way Stede would gently put his hands on Ed's back when he passed behind him while he was cutting fabric, and how he would always pick stray threads off Ed's shirt made his heart hurt in the best way possible. It didn't help that Ed found out their next two gigs for the fall season were only about an hour drive from each other, meaning he could *potentially* visit him on off days if they *hypothetically* started dating. But Ed *totally* wasn't planning all of this in his head right now.

Ed arrived at the theater a bit earlier than normal, wanting to get a head start on the day, and was surprised to find Stede already there. He was reading a book, all his wigs set on blocks, ready to be worn, and seemed startled when Ed knocked on the door frame. Stede rose to his feet and pretended to brush one of the wigs.

"Hey, working hard in here, mate?" Ed joked, "Just you today?" Stede chuckled nervously, keeping up the mindless brushing, "yes, everything's about ready to head out! I'm just doing some last minute touch—ups! Are you still finishing things up for the day?" He seemed a little nervous, but Ed couldn't figure out why, "yeah, there's like ten notes left, I figured I could knock 'em out and give my guys a rest. So, you're not sticking around for too long or —?" He tried not to seem too desperate for alone time with Stede.

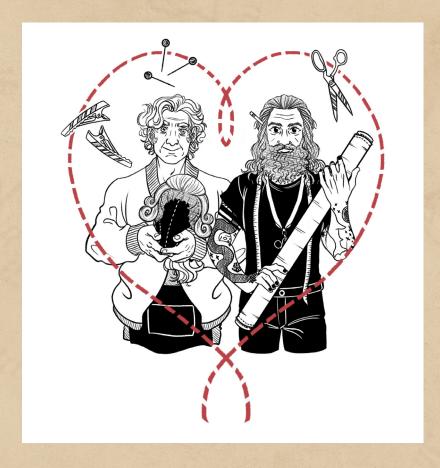
"Oh, um, I suppose not. Unless, *you* need help with anything?" Ed was surprised to hear his offer for help, trying to convince himself that it meant nothing more than that. "Hm, how well do you sew?" Ed asked. Stede smiled proudly before answering, "Not well! But I'm always eager to learn something new!" Ed thought that was incredibly cute, and struggled not to smile too wide.

Ed tried giving a brief lesson in simple stitches, but Stede kept poking himself when it came to actually sewing the costumes. "Sorry I'm not too helpful, but I'm sure I'd be much better after a few more lessons," Stede laughed with Ed at how uneven his stitches were. "I mean, we're kind of out of time here, but maybe we could — make more time? Like, next week?" Ed was screaming internally as he tried to act smooth but came off as awkward, hoping that Stede was picking up on his intentions. Stede seemed more than open to the idea of seeing Ed *outside of work*, as his mouth pulled into a smile and a blush rose to his face, "Well that's — an idea. A good idea I mean! How about next Monday?"

Now that Ed knew they were on the same page, he was excited to hear his offer. "Yep, yeah, sounds nice. Uh, so I'll call you about that then?" Ed

stumbled on his words a bit, but Stede nodded quickly as he gathered his things and headed to the door. "Sure, I'll talk to you later then!" Stede said, shuffling out of the room awkwardly. As soon as he was out the door, Ed let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. His heart leapt in his chest and he had never been more excited to call someone in his life. Ed returned to his work table, with the biggest smile on his face, already planning for their first lesson.











THE ADVENTURES OF IZZY PAWS

LUSTIG

no content warnings apply.



A day in the life of the Dread of the Rats, Scourge of the Seven Seas, Ship Cat Superior and the only one who does any fucking WORK on this stupid ship.

Izzy Paws woke up to a rough tongue enthusiastically (yet, oddly gently) cleaning his face. He blinked his eyes open and stared into the perfectly shaped white spot in the middle of *The Gentlecat Of Goldenfur Stede Bonnet*'s throat – and yes, that was (unfortunately) his real name.

Izzy just called him *Idiot*. With a capital I: he was too much of an idiot to deserve the small one.

"What the *fuck*," he hissed, springing to his feet and puffing up all his fur, knowing it made him look twice as big. Even with that, though, he still looked tiny next to fucking Idiot, who came from a stupid proper breeding home and had never had to go hungry before. He had – for some reason Izzy *still* did not understand (although, admittedly, he had not put much effort into *trying* to understand Idiot) – decided to run away from his perfectly pampered life. Who would give up three bowls of cream a day and as much fresh fish as he could eat to become a fucking high seas rat catcher?

Or, *ship cat*, as Idiot called it. Totally overlooking that they were on board with a fucking *job*. Idiot was about as useless as a fucking newborn *kitten*.

It also did not help that Captain – the most beautiful brown tabby Izzy had ever laid his eyes on – had pounced on the chance of hearing all the fancy fucking stories that *twat* told and ignore his job as well, leaving Izzy with all the work. Then again, Captain had never liked *killing* the rats, only catching them – but that was why they were a *team*. Or used to be, at least. And now Captain wanted to be called *Ed*, mewling mournfully at the lack of name he

had been *totally fine with* his whole *life*, before Idiot had come around and destroyed it *all*.

And now Idiot had woken Izzy from his *perfectly perfect sleep* to fucking... *groom* him like they were fucking *friends* or *lovers*, even. It had taken him nearly a year before he let *Captain* groom him for the first time. And, unlike Idiot, he had always *liked* Captain.

"You need to take better care of your fur," Idiot had the fucking gall to chide him.

"Fuck off! My fur is fucking immaculate! Unlike you, I actually learned to groom by myself without needing any stupid fancy oils or brushes or... whatever the fuck they put into your fur so it's so fucking glossy!" He stalked off, fur still standing up in every direction, not bothering to wait for Idiot's answer or (God forbid) his stupid hurt expression.

Idiot would probably run to Captain and cry about how mean old Izzy Paws hurt his feelings again. Then Captain would give Izzy his Disappointed Stare again and *fuck*, Izzy was too *tired* for all this bullshit.

He disappeared into the belly of the ship, stalking the shadows until movement in the corner of his eyes caught his attention and – *pounce*, *claw*, *bite* – he had breakfast *and* a head start on today's work.

Izzy took his haul with him to the kitchen, purring proudly to himself. Secretly, he was hoping that Cook would offer him some small reward for his good work: a piece of fish, or even a dollop of cream if he could spare it.

He dropped the rat at the entrance to the kitchen and mewled high and hopeful, until Cook came and crouched down in front of him to scratch him behind the ears, just the way Izzy liked. He purred, pleased, and rubbed his head into Cook's hand and against his knee, swishing his tail happily.

"Got an early start, huh, Paws?" the Cook praised him. At least *someone* knew to value Izzy's hard work. "Want a little something to go with your rat?"

Izzy mewled a polite confirmation – it always paid out to be polite to the Cook, no one ever caught *him* stealing sips of milk or cream – and the Cook soon came back with a saucerful of milk. It was slightly watered down, but that just meant Izzy had more to enjoy, even if the taste was less intense. He purred loudly in appreciation as he lapped up the offering, then dug into his rat.

By now, some other members of the crew had turned up – including the Musician, who was so funnily afraid of Izzy. Well, then again, Izzy was a scary

bugger, so of course everyone should be afraid of him... but the Musician was especially easy to startle.

Izzy crept out of the kitchen and underneath the tables until he reached the Musician. He started stroking around his feet, rubbing his head and tail all over the Musician's legs and relishing in the startled cry. He jumped out of the way, just in time to avoid the Musician pulling his feet up to get out of Izzy's reach – which would be useless if Izzy truly set his mind to fucking with the guy, but he decided to be merciful this morning. The milk was warming him from the inside out.

He stalked out of the kitchen with his head held high and tail held higher.

"Hey, gatito," the person whose nose changed halfway through their journey greeted him as he stepped out on deck. He mewled a greeting back. Different Nose was very good company; they rarely talked and used their knives as comfortably as Izzy used his claws. They were the most dangerous person on the ship – by far – and had Izzy's respect. They were also very good friends with Funny Shoes, whose stomach made for an excellent sleeping spot when Idiot and Captain were being gross in their shared quarters again.

The crew called Funny Shoes "Captain" as well. Maybe that was why Captain wanted to be called Ed now? Izzy still thought it was mostly Idiot's fault, but maybe he could try to be more... *understanding* about Captain Ed's wish for a new name. Even though it was blatantly obvious that Captain was much higher in the ship's hierarchy than Funny Shoes. Funny Shoes did not get free choice of his sleeping spot, for example.

The Painter was already out on deck as well, Izzy saw. When they first started sailing together, Izzy caught him *everywhere* with the Toymaker and the Dog Person and got *very* good at staring unblinkingly at them while swishing his tail until they stopped being gross with each other. They all got so *uncomfortable* under Izzy's stare.

They usually restricted their... proclivities to their quarters, now. And Toymaker had long since made up for his involvement in their public displays of affection by whittling little wooden mice for Izzy, which he guarded *jealously* from Idiot.

Dog Person usually tried to avoid Izzy. Some nights, though, Izzy finds him out on deck, staring sadly into the distance. He knows that on those nights, he is allowed to climb into Dog Person's lap and purr quietly while Dog Person talks about how much he misses his... dog.

The Painter was already occupied with his sketchbook, so Izzy stealthily

climbed into his lap and curled up there. It was Nap Time, after all, and the Painter had a very good lap to nap in. He only needed one hand to draw, really, and his other always came to rest in the nape of Izzy's neck, gently scratching and petting him. It was very soothing and Izzy enjoyed falling asleep like that, rewarding the Painter with a low rumbling purr.

After Nap Time came more Rat Time, of course. Izzy Paws was a conscientious cat, after all. Izzy went to look for Idiot and – and *Ed*, to hunt for some rats together. Idiot, of course, was utterly fucking useless when it came to catching anything not served to him on a platter, but Captain was very insistent in teaching Idiot their artful craft. Never mind that Captain was also useless at actually *killing* rats; he only ever played with them until Izzy came around to finish them off for him.

He forced (Idiot called it *bullied*) the pair into joining him and they *did* have a successful hunt, catching two more rats together –a satisfactory amount for the day. Especially since both Idiot and Ed have gotten rather used to being regularly fed even without doing their jobs, so every killed rat was a win in Izzy's book.

As soon as they were done hunting, Idiot offered to clean Captain's fur for him. Captain danced around all bashfully and purred louder than he had ever purred for *Izzy* when they groomed each other, back in the days *before* stupid fucking Stede Bonnet. Izzy gagged up a hairball, just to make a point, before stalking off to find a place to mope somewhere. Maybe with Moon Head, Dog Person's best friend, who always wore leather pants and let Izzy knead his legs for as long as he needed to get rid of his angry energy. It was no different today, and Izzy felt *much* better when he curled up in the sun afterwards.

He woke up not long after with Captain and Idiot curled around him on both sides. He puffed up his fur, but it was of no use; there was no escape from their possessive embrace. Izzy could not run away. Well. He *could*, of course, but it would make Captain upset with him again. Izzy staying had (of *course*) nothing at all to do with how good it felt to have two more purring bodies around him. Nope, absolutely not, do not be fucking *delusional*.

After finally breaking free (once Captain and Idiot deigned to let him get up again) he balanced on the railing, to greet Big Guy where he was working with the guns. He always smelled like fire, but that was okay. He, at least, was enthusiastic about his job. His hands were so big that even Idiot looked small in them, but they were still so very gentle – like they were used to working with fine fabrics instead of gunpowder and cannonballs. He was also the only

person who could get the Musician to voluntarily come close to any of the cats.

A sudden wave and a moment of inattention sent Izzy slipping, all of a sudden. He yowled in panic, knowing that falling meant *death*.

A hand caught him – in his *neck*, like a fucking *kitten* – but he was too grateful to have his fall stopped to give that thought the indignation it deserved.

"I have got you, Izzy," Angel Voice told him softly and held him close, Izzy's whole small body shaking and trembling from the adrenaline of the near miss. He meeped a pathetic small thanks and let Angel Voice keep petting him, despite all his fur being puffed up; something that would probably end in a total mess he would have to fix again, later.

After fixing his fur, grudgingly accepting the help from Idiot and Captain, he went back amongst the crew. It was getting close to night-time, so he found the barrel Angel Voice usually slept inside and got comfortable on his back, curling together with him and purring in proper thanks for the save earlier. Angel Voice started crying at that and Izzy resolved to visit him more often in the night.

He waited until Angel Voice was asleep before slipping away again, up to the helm where Bird Guy and Karl were already bathing in moonglow. He jumped up on the helm and sat down, gracefully curling his tail around him.

"Good evening, Karl," he greeted the visitor politely. You did not fuck with seagulls. He had seen cats lose their eyes trying to hunt one.

"Good evening, Mr. Paws," Karl greeted him back, which was what earned Bird Guy's attention.

"Evening, Izzy. Glad ye could make it. The moon is beautiful tonight."

Izzy tilted his head and chirped a quiet agreement. The three spent the rest of the night in silent company. Izzy left them just before dawn crept over the horizon, to find his own quarters. He wedged himself into bed between Idiot and Captain, who curled around his small frame and pulled him into deeper sleep with their happy purring.

Life was good.













Professional Hench

JENNA FLARE

no content warnings apply.



FIRST NATIONAL URCA BANK, MIDTOWN BRANCH, 5:53 PM

The bank heist goes tits—up almost immediately. You'd think with a crew their size, they might be able to knock over a small bank like this without so many problems, but they're monumentally bad at this whole supervillainy thing. Frenchie knows it. But, it's the only thing he has on his CV aside from the long list of songs he's written, and henching is steadier work than music. (He's been hawking his SoundCloud for a decade now and still hasn't managed to snag a contract.)

It goes like this:

The incompetent Lighthouse and his crew of largely–incompetent henchmen roll into the Midtown branch of First National Urca near closing time. The Lighthouse (running about needlessly to make his long white coat flap dramatically) hauls himself up onto a table (with Wee John's assistance) and announces the bank is being robbed. Cue normal responses from the people still in the building — fear, anger, etcetera. The henches put swords on the bank employees and order them to start unloading the safe.

"I'm sorry," the bank manager (middle–aged, besuited and diminutive) says, pulling at his tie as his face tinges red. "The... the vault is practically empty. Money pickup was earlier this afternoon."

The Lighthouse's smile flickers for a moment. "Picked up?" he laughs. Then, the smile evaporates. "Picked — picked up?" He plops himself down on the table so he can slide off its edge and march over to the bearer of bad news. "No, no, the pickup was supposed to be... Show me."

The bank manager nods once and leads the Lighthouse over to the vault,

unlocking it and leading him inside. A few moments pass, and then the Lighthouse yells, "Fuck!" He storms out of the vault, the ceiling lamps flickering in the wake of his irritation. "Change of plan, everyone! Get the money out of the tills, okay?"

And then, sirens outside. Blue and red light swivels across the front windows, casting bars of color through the mostly–drawn blinds on the bank's white floor.

"Okay, which one of you hit the silent alarm?" Black Pete demands of the bank employees, wiggling his sword at them in a way Frenchie thinks is supposed to be threatening.

"Don't panic!" the Lighthouse says, shrilly and pretty clearly panicking. "We can still make this work!"

Outside, a cop yells into a megaphone: "Come out with your hands up and no one gets hurt!"

"I'm not going out there," Frenchie says immediately. Through the blinds, he spots cops pointing their guns at the door, waiting for anyone to step outside. *No thank you.*

"No one is going out there," the Lighthouse reassures, though the fear in his voice is far from reassuring. "Okay, everyone, we need a plan!"

His words are met with silence. Frenchie squishes his hands into his face as he tries to come up with something and swears he smells the metaphorical smoke pouring from his ears.

Wait. No, that's actual, real smoke starting to gather at the ceiling. What the fuck is on fire? (Related side thought: why aren't any smoke alarms going off?) He checks through the blinds again and — *shit*.

"They're coming!" Frenchie yells, scrambling away from the doors. But there's nowhere for him (or anyone else) to go. It's a good thing he moved, though, because moments after the glass behinds him explodes as a cop outside fires.

One of the tellers screams and she and the other remaining employees drop to the ground, cowering.

"What are they doing?" The Lighthouse yells, crouching behind the table he'd stood on earlier. "There's bystanders in here!"

Oluwande, ducked down next to him, says, "Don't think they care."

Another shot and another window explodes, raining glass over the floor as

the megaphone blasts, "Come out with your hands up!"

This is so not how Frenchie wants to go.

But then, from behind the teller's booth, Jim calls out, "This way!" and disappears through a door.

"Oh, is there a back exit?" the Lighthouse asks, hurrying after them. Everyone makes their way behind the counter and into the back room.

There's no back exit; Jim is hacking away at a wall with an axe. Where the hell did they even *find* an axe?

"So resourceful!" The Lighthouse almost pats Jim on the arm, then seems to think better of it seeing as they're mid-swing.

Wee John steps forward and says, "May I?" Jim shrugs and backs off. With one kick, Wee John smashes through the weakened wall, bringing down a section of it even he can fit through. (He doesn't have super strength, but he might as well have.) The Lighthouse laughs in delight.

"Excellent work, you two! You'll be seeing a bonus on your next paystub."

"Bullshit," Black Pete mutters.

They all scramble out the newly-made hole and into the alleyway behind the bank.

"Where'd you find that axe?" Oluwande asks as the crew makes their way back to the van.

Jim grins. "By the fire extinguisher."

Frenchie hadn't even seen a fire extinguisher anywhere.

The drive back to HQ is a long one and Buttons makes some... interesting decisions regarding the route they take.

"Are all these narrow alleys and sharp turns completely necessary?" The Lighthouse asks from the passenger's seat as he clutches at his stomach and presses his forehead into the window.

"They're hot on our tail, Boss!" Buttons proclaims, twisting the steering wheel ninety degrees to the tune of screeching rubber, sending the van hurtling down another alleyway, the walls of which nearly scrape the paint off. A bag of garbage gets caught under the wheels and explodes into a flurry of soggy papers and food waste, spraying out behind their fleeing vehicle like a comet's tail.

"Pretty sure we've lost them," Lucius argues desperately from the very back of the van. He's even paler than the Lighthouse is, but Buttons is relentless.

"Cannae have the pigs following us back to our base!"

And on it goes, on the most circuitous route north through and out of the city, up to a rocky beach and along the winding, twisting road that leads to the old, derelict lighthouse the Lighthouse's crew calls home.



THE LIGHTHOUSE, 10:54 PM

The haggard crew returns to their base of operations in the bleak, salty night air. Waves lash themselves against the rocky shore, and it's fucking cold. The lighthouse (the building, not the man who won't listen to the fact that sharing a name with his headquarters gets confusing) sits as solitary and unmoving as ever as the ragtag group makes their way inside.

The Lighthouse (the man, not the building) addresses his crew of henchmen before sending them off for the night:

"Tonight... didn't go as planned, I think is fair to say."

"Fucking no it didn't," Black Pete is quick to rejoin. A few others nod.

The Lighthouse holds up a hand and nods in solemn agreement. "There are a lot of things that we all could have done better. So let's sleep on it and discuss in the morning, okay?"

Frenchie, like most of the henches, is glad to let it go. Black Pete looks about to argue the point further — probably name their boss as the sole reason a simple bank heist went off the rails so quickly — but Wee John throws an arm around his shoulders and neck, effectively cutting off any verbal rebuttals. It's late and everyone just wants to get a drink (or two or three or —) and pass the hell out.

"Hold on," Jim says. They toss a small black bag at the Lighthouse, who fumbles the catch and drops it on the concrete floor.

"What's this?" he asks, scooping it from between his feet. The bag is tiny and velvet, and when the Lighthouse pulls open the drawstring bag, his face brightens — literally. He's so pleased with the bag's contents that his skin starts to glow, radiating the light that was undoubtedly the reason he chose his moniker and headquarters. "Where on earth did you find *diamonds* in that bank?"

"Security box," Jim says, and then doesn't elaborate more. Frenchie has to wonder, how did they even have *time* to get into a lockbox amidst all of that chaos? He'd just been trying to get out with his skin intact. (How *had* that fire started, anyway? Frenchie casts Wee John a suspicious look.)

"Well, excellent work, Jim!" the Lighthouse praises. He holds up the small bag for all to see and gives them all an *I-know-you-can-do-better* look, "I hope in the future the rest of you bring this kind of dedication to the job!"

Lucius rolls his eyes over the top of the journal he's scribbling away in, and Black Pete struggles against Wee John's firm grip around his neck. The Lighthouse bids them all goodnight, and then saunters up the stairs to his quarters.

Wee John finally releases Pete.

"This is *such* bullshit," Pete gripes, rubbing at his neck and glaring up the stairs. His tangent continues in much the same way that it always does, and Frenchie just tunes him out. He's fairly certain *no one* is listening, but Black Pete never seems to care. Or, more likely, he just doesn't notice.

Anyway, there's a more interesting conversation taking place on the other side of the room that Frenchie wants to eavesdrop on.

Jim leans against the slightly concave wall, Oluwande next to them. Olu asks, "So how'd you manage to get your hands on that, anyway?"

Jim smirks, pride self–evident in the crinkle and twinkle of their eyes. "Nabbed a key off the bank manager. Picked the secondary lock. Pretty easy." They lean in a bit closer to Oluwande, dropping their voice conspiratorially. "There's another bag in my pocket."

Oluwande laughs and shakes his head. "Don't let that lot hear you," he says, giving a significant glance at the rest of the henches. Frenchie seems to be the only one eavesdropping on their conversation, but Black Pete's loud complaining has developed into something of an argument ("You never worked for the Kraken. If you did, why would you be henching for the Lighthouse now?") so Oluwande doesn't notice Frenchie nonchalantly listening in.

Frenchie kinda wants some of those diamonds, to be honest. But he's also started to wonder: why the hell is Jim henching? They don't have any super powers, sure, but they're incredible with a blade, light on their feet, proficient with lockpicks — they could be a supervillain in their own right. (Or at the least, go the cool cat burglar route. They'd rock that look.) It's almost insulting to say that they're more badass than the Lighthouse because of how

low of a bar that is, but it's true. They could run this outfit, easy.

Frenchie isn't usually one for detective work or mysteries, but —

"No!" Black Pete shouts. "I've had enough of this shit, and I *know* you guys have to be tired of this too."

"Well, ja, but what do we do?"

"We kill him. Duh."

The crew falls headlong into the discussion — everyone's on the same page about killing the Lighthouse (a resounding "yes"), but the questions of "how" and "who's in charge after" lead to a heated, sprawling argument that only gets worse the more people drink. And as Frenchie gets swept up in the charged current of the debate, his questions about Jim get left behind, lost to the choppy seas of mutiny.







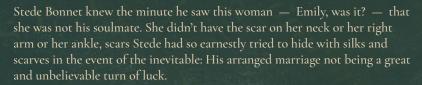




I HAD GIVEN UP

CHARLIE

no content warnings apply



Stede Bonnet knew the minute he looked into Emily's eyes, eyes that carefully traced up his arm, covered by a notably thin white cotton blouse, that she knew what he knew.

And most importantly, they knew that they would forever be stuck together in a loveless marriage that they had to grimace their way through, a fact promised as their guardians shook hands as if it were a business deal.

To be fair, it kind of was.



There was a point in his life where Ed had given up. Not just on humanity or hope, but on fate.

He forged his own path. He wasn't to be tied down by a soulmate. He was Blackbeard. These are all things he told himself, but he never believed them. Not really. It wasn't that easy to get rid of humanity or hope or fate. The ideas of them, at least, stuck to him like glue, a concept foreign to him due to the combination of time period and upbringing. But if he had known about the wonders of glue, he would agree that all of those, humanity, hope, and fate, stuck to him just like glue.

Glue and its wonders and history aside, no. No, Blackbeard was not a heart-

less monster who forged his own path, unaffected by the tight binds of, for lack of a less cliche term, destiny. He was not some amalgamation of hate and corruption that simply ignored papercuts when they showed up overnight, brushing them away without any thought. He was not some devil, a reaper, that didn't trace his own scars in hopes his soulmate had them too. He was not Blackbeard, a man who didn't care about that pricking in his finger that ached like a splinter. He was Ed. And he did all of those things.



The guilt that had slowly, but surely, been bubbling in Stede over the past few months dissipated the minute, the moment, he saw him. Stede wasn't sure exactly who 'he' was, and this relief was so momentary it barely even counted as existing, but it still happened, and he was acutely aware of it. And he very quickly, as he wasn't a stupid man (contrary to popular belief), pieced together why. Why it had happened in the first place. He tried to control his breathing as he stared at the man's right arm.

Stede, flooded with the whiplash of returning guilt and something new, something he couldn't place, leaned forward to hold this man. The stab wound, however, stopped him, forcing him to slam back down with a sharp inhale.

"Forgot about that." He turned his wince into a sheepish grin.



Ed didn't respond, staring in wonder at the culprit behind the papercuts. A slow smile spread out across his face, and it was a strange thing. It hurt his face, but the stab wound hurt more. But if anything, he just wanted it to hurt even more. He wanted to feel the pain sear throughout his body and he wanted to bleed until he was dizzy, because more pain was more confirmation that, yes, Stede Bonnet was his soulmate.

He scanned every part of Stede's face. Ever wrinkle, smile line, dimple, whatever. He wanted to map the topography of this man's face and fucking frame it. He wanted to do so much.

After a minute of joyous staring (though it wasn't really a minute, only the minute Stede had been awake for and reciprocated, Ed responded, and although he hid it well, he was breathless in his words.

"Hello."







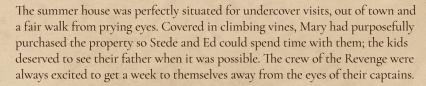




MAKE IT OFFICIAL

RAMSAY BAGGINS

no content warnings apply.





The distance meant no one came to check on the loud screaming that pierced the quiet jungle, yelling and crashing and drama all blanketing the house in a cacophony of sound.

"Unhand my cabin boy!" Alma shouted, holding her wooden sword out at arm's length, one hand on her hip. The feather in her Captain's hat drooped in her peripheral vision as Louis watched from behind a sofa.

"Never!" Ed yelled, his arm wound tightly around Stede's waist as the rope kept his captive's hands bound behind his back. Stede was trying to look frightened, but he wasn't sure it was working.

"Then prepare to fight!" Alma answered, her eyes flashing and a dangerous curve of a smile on her lips.

"A duel, then?" Ed posed, cocking an eyebrow.

"A duel," she replied with a nod of acceptance.

Ed let out a loud, villainous laugh, "Prepare to die!"

He removed his arm from Stede's waist and gently helped him sit down cross legged on the floor.

"Be careful," Stede said quietly with a smile, "She's better with a blade than she looks."

Ed pecked him on the lips, "I'm fuckin' Blackbeard, mate."

Ed stood again, brandishing his own wooden sword with a flourish. He nearly laughed out loud when Stede called out to Alma.

"Save me, Captain! Please!"

Alma narrowed her eyes and leant forward slightly, leading with her blade, "Dread pirate Blackbeard, this is your last chance to surrender."

"Blackbeard never surrenders," Ed replied, grinning.



Ed wasn't sure what he'd expected from Alma after Stede's warning, but the duel had been going well until she had unceremoniously ducked under his blade and brought hers in hard against his knee brace.

"You're all absolutely fucking unhinged," he said holding back a smile through gritted teeth as he hopped on his good foot, clutching at his throbbing knee.

"I did warn you!" Stede said. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," he hissed under a chuckle.

Stede was already back in character, "Captain! You've felled the mighty Blackbeard!"

Alma stood, arms raised triumphantly in the air, "I am now the dread pirate queen of the seven seas!"

Stede cheered her on, "Thank you for saving me!"

Alma bent down to untie Stede, who embraced her in a quick hug then stood and looked at Ed with concern.

"Are you sure you're ok?" he asked, brows raised and knotted together in that way Ed couldn't resist.

Ed put his foot back on the floor and tested his weight on his knee, "Yeah I'm fine, brace took most of the impact."

Ed turned on a stricken look and knelt down in front of Alma, "You have bested me in a duel, Captain Alma. My ship is yours. What is my fate to be?"

Alma looked at him, eyes pensive. "Banishment," she said, matter-of-factly. "And take the cabin boy with you, he's obviously stupid if he let himself get caught."

Ed couldn't hold in a laugh as Stede spluttered in indignation.

"Alright, I can live with that," Ed said, grabbing Stede around his waist again as he stood and pulling him in for a kiss.

"Eeewww," came the protests of Alma and Louis, making Ed and Stede laugh.



The children had eventually gone to bed, after every stalling trick in the book and multiple attempts at sneaking out of their room were thwarted. Stede lay against Ed on a burgundy sofa, while Mary sat in Doug's lap on an armchair. They were all deep in their cups, empty bottles of red wine scattered across the low table between the occupied furniture.

"So then he turned up drunk to my art show and threatened Doug!" Mary was saying, the dregs of her last glass sloshing in her hand.

"No!" Ed gasped, looking down at Stede, brows raised and mouth open.

"'S true," Stede slurred, nodding guiltily. "Wasn't my finest moment."

"It sounds pretty hot though," Ed replied, a grin spreading across his face.

Stede returned the smile and waggled his eyebrows, "Prob'ly was."

"So anyway," Mary continued, taking Ed's attention again, "that night I tried to kill him with a skewer." She giggled.

"A skewer?" Ed replied in disbelief. "This is a family of lunatics. You're just as mad as each other!"

"I deserved it," Stede said, steadfastly. "I was a complete bastard."

"You were," Mary replied, nodding in agreement.

"Woke up though," Stede hummed. "Caught her before she managed it."

"That's lucky," Ed half growled, "Cos I'd've had to kill you Mary, if you'd done it."

There was a pause before everyone burst out laughing.

"Wouldn't blame you!" Mary said, leaning forward and raising her mostly empty glass. "Didn't know he'd found someone."

"'S true," Stede said, looking up at Ed with those wide eyes that always drew him in. "That's when I figured out I loved you."

Ed broke out into a wide smile, "Aww."

"Get a room," Mary laughed as the two men kissed on the couch.



Stede groaned as he rolled over, a sliver of sunlight creeping past the shutters to rouse him from his sleep. His head thumped as he cracked an eye open, but he smiled despite the deep hangover making itself known as he saw Ed's face lying on the pillow beside his. He slowly shimmied over and draped an arm across Ed's back, hoping sleep would take him back into its warm embrace.

Any chance of drifting off was rudely interrupted as the door burst open and Alma and Louis poured into the room and onto the bed.

"Dad, Dad! You promised we'd go fishing today!"

Stede groaned as Ed sat bolt upright, relaxing as he realised they were in a bed and the invaders were just Stede's children. After a moment Stede heard the hangover hit him as well.

"Yes, just let us get up," Stede said to his excited children. "We're feeling a little delicate so we'll be along once we've refreshed ourselves."

"Mum's made breakfast, she's left you some by the stove but it's probably cold by now," Alma said, looking into Stede's eyes with a burning intensity.

"You're late getting up," Louis said to Ed, pointedly.

"Okay, okay," Ed replied, running a hand across his eyes and down his face. "We'll not be long and then we'll take you fishing."

The children were seemingly satisfied at that and ran back out the room, closing the door behind them. Stede sagged forward while Ed dropped back down onto the pillows.

"Your kids are fuckin' terrors, mate," he mumbled at the ceiling.

"Yep," Stede replied, yawning as he stretched his arms up. "Great, aren't they?" Ed smiled. "Brilliant."



急

The carriage trundled down the dirt roads, the bounce of occasional potholes jostling the two men inside.

"I'm fuckin' exhausted," Blackbeard sighed, looking at Stede. "I dunno how you used to do that all the time."

Stede smiled, "Well, I wasn't always as involved as I should've been, but we did spend a lot of time playing pirates."

"I'm gonna need a holiday from that holiday," Ed groaned as he stretched out his aching knee. A week's worth of chasing kids around and getting used to being on land had taken its toll.

"Next time we can build in a couple of days buffer on the end, how does that sound?" Stede was watching Ed with that lazy adoration that always made him feel like he was floating.

"Perfect," he replied, with his own smile in answer.

"You know," Stede started, turning to look out the window. "The kids really loved you."

"Yeah?" Ed replied, "Don't really have much experience with kids, I thought I might've scared 'em or something."

Stede fixed him with a stare, brows raised, "You thought you scared them? After Alma very easily bested you in a duel on day one?"

"Wasn't very easily," Ed pouted, defending his honour. "But that's a good point."

"What' I'm trying to say," Stede continued, "is that, well, now we're together and will be forever, hopefully, well... you're their step-father now."

Ed's brain short circuited for a moment as the weight of that statement hit home, "I– I thought that was only if you remarried."

Stede's expression faltered for a moment, "Well, technically yes, but honestly I sort of considered us-"

"Do you want to?" Ed blurted out.

Stede's brows shot up, "Want to what?"

"Get married, make it official, you know?" Ed rushed.

This time it was Stede's turn to pause in surprise before a shy grin spread across his face, "Yes, yes I do."

Ed realised his heart was thumping hard in his chest, "Great, we can do it when we get back to the ship."

Ed leaned forward to capture Stede's beaming face in a kiss. When they broke apart Ed suddenly remembered what had prompted his proposal.

"Um, Stede?"

"Yes, dearest?" Stede replied, dreamily.

"I don't really know how to be a step-dad."

Stede laughed, "Well, you did a pretty good job of it this week. I think you'll be fine."

Ed smiled softly as he settled back against the padded wall of the carriage. If Stede said he could do it, then he'd be okay.













FOR THE MOON NEVER BEAMS (WITHOUT BRINGING ME DREAMS)

SHRAPNEL

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Stede's hand is a warm weight on Edward's back, supporting Ed's weight as he stumbles and falls backward. Stede is smiling softly, eyes crinkling as he looks down at Ed.

"Wasn't quite time for the dip, yet."

Edward breathes out a chuckle and hoists his weight upright. He forces himself to look away from the way the moonlight shines in Stede's hair, and the way his gaze makes him want to melt into a puddle of warm goo on the spot. "Keep getting my feet all tangled up."

"Quite alright," Stede says, and Ed glances up to see the soft smile be replaced by a proud grin. "You're farther along than I was on my first lesson. I kept tripping up my instructor on my way down."

"Doesn't sound optimal, mate."

"It wasn't," Stede agrees. He holds out his hand, palm up, fingers crooked as though he wants to wrap them around Edward's hand. "Let's try again, shall we?"

Ed takes Stede's hand and lets him guide him around the deck of the ship, Stede's soft whisper of "One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two three..." directing his feet and Stede's hands tugging him in gentle circles.

They've been at this for a few hours now, the latest in Ed's education in How To Be A Part Of The Upper Crust. Edward had specially requested the lesson. He has bittersweet childhood memories of dance – of tagging along with his mother to the Big Fancy House she worked in, of seeing the children

his age learning to dance as they passed the ballroom, of his disappointment when his mother hurried him away with a hushed "Come along now, Edward; that's not for us. We've got work to do."

The memories hurt, just like the red silk he keeps tucked away in his pocket. But how *fantastic* had it felt to see Stede admiring the silk? To see him fold it up and, just like that, this dirty scrap he's kept safe all these years could fit into the same uppity society that had tried to snub him, to mock him?

Ed's spent the weeks since the French party ship burned thinking through how he feels about their deal, about continuing to learn the ways of the upper crust. On the one hand, it feels dirty in a way. Like he's trying to fit a circle in a square hole, like he's trying to submit to the whims of those who don't care about him and his ilk and never will. Like he's setting himself up for disappointment and hurt all over again, just like when he walked onto that ship with all the swagger of Blackbeard only to have Jeff the Accountant be laughed at and mocked the entire time.

On the other hand, it feels freeing. Like he's spitting in the face of that self–appointed authority, like he's claiming it for his own. He can take all the soft things that they take for granted and he can enjoy them in his own space, away from their arbitrary rules and double–edged speech. He can see the ways that little scrap of silk can be beautiful, and he can receive a genuine compliment from a beautiful man that has nothing to do with his skill with a blade and everything to do with enjoying fine, soft, gentle things. He can learn to dance, finally, can feel Stede's hand in his and the weight of Stede's hand on his back, can feel the slip of silk over strong muscles as his own hand rests on Stede's back in return.

Ed stumbles again, lost in the feeling of silk and soft hands and losing track of his feet. Stede catches him again, squeezing his hand tight in his.

"Are you sure you don't want one of the lads up here to play something?"
Stede smiles as he asks the question, tugging Edward back to his feet with ease. For someone who never had to do manual labor prior to sailing on the Revenge, Stede certainly is able to maneuver Edward around their makeshift ballroom easily, setting his hands and feet to the correct position and working with Ed's weight to make them flow around the deck with ease. "Frenchie knows a few waltzes on his lute, it helps a lot to learn to music."

"Nah," Edward says. "This is fine; don't wanna trip up in front of the lads. Captains should lead by example." "Even captains make mistakes," Stede says. He's got a slight pout on his lips, and Ed squashes down the urge to kiss it away.

"They do," he agrees. "But I do prefer to practice *before* I dance in front of the crew. Best impression is if I'm not flat on my fucking face, and all that."

"True, true." Stede's fingers squeeze his hand again. Each has their fingers tightly together, cupping one another's palm and wrapping fingertips around to barely brush the back of the other's hand. Their palms are flush together, Stede's pinkie resting against Edward's index finger.

They slowly start to move again, stepping in time with Stede's counting – "One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three." – and it feels like they're gliding around the deck. Ed finds his feet moving without having to think about it much, and he lets himself focus on this moment. On the glow of the moon and stars beaming down upon them, on the soft *click* of their boots along the shining wood of the deck, on the softness of Stede's hand in his own callused one.

Stede slowly stops counting, shifting to a light hum instead, keeping them in time with the emphasis he places on every third note of the tune. He shifts his fingers against Edward's hand, and Ed shifts his fingers right back. He spreads his fingers out and cautiously lays their hands flat against one another before linking their fingers together, first the pinkie, then following with the other fingers until their fingertips rest against one another's knuckles.

Stede's breath catches, and he's staring at their laced fingers like they're one of the world's wonders.

He glances up and meets Edward's eyes, and Ed's heart skips a beat. He's felt like this often, since meeting Stede. Little flips and nervous butterflies in his stomach as he watches Stede turn the pages of his books, watches him grit his teeth and pick up his sword to try yet again, watches him delicately measure out tea to make the perfect cup, complete with a dollop of milk and seven sugars.

Edward Teach is completely head over heels in love with Stede Bonnet.

The thought makes him trip again, and this time he falls hard enough that Stede can't catch him. Stede comes crashing down to the deck with him, their legs tangled in a heap and their fingers still laced together. Edward lands on his back, Stede lands on Edward, and as they both open their eyes, they find their faces closer together than they'd been even while waltzing.

There's a moment, the span of a breath that feels like an eternity, where Stede just rests there, looking into Edward's eyes with his jaw slack with surprise. Edward flicks his gaze down to Stede's lips, and when he looks back up he finds Stede looking at his own lips. He blinks, and Stede is meeting his gaze once more, a wry smile tugging his lips.

Stede rolls off of Edward, and despite Ed missing his weight, Stede keeps their fingers intertwined. He revels in the warmth of Stede's hand, and they look up at the stars in peaceful silence. The waves rock the *Revenge*, water splashing up the sides of the ship.

Edward isn't certain what tomorrow will bring. He knows he should leave. Fang and Ivan have returned to the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Fuck knows where Izzy is. Ed has a crew and a ship of his own to attend to, and he's put off leaving because he enjoys Stede's company on the *Revenge* so damn much.

But for right now, at this moment, Stede's fingers are laced between Edward's, and the moonglow reflects off the water, and the stars twinkle overhead. When Edward turns his head, he sees the soft lines of Stede's jaw in shadow, the outline of his nose, and the wonder in his eyes as he looks at the stars. And for right now, Edward is content to watch that forever.







THE REVENGE TRAVELING PERFORMANCE COMPANY

WATEROFTHEMOON

no content warnings apply.



Ed knows it's ridiculous as soon as he says it. All of them have their own reasons for being pirates. He's their captain (*co–captain*), yeah, but who is he to suggest that they just give it all up?

But the idea of being at sea, on the *Revenge*, without having to do any of the usual shit is the first thing that's excited Ed in days.

(He doesn't know why Stede didn't come. He wishes he did. Then maybe he could stop writing such terrible lyrics.)

Lucius is right — it doesn't have to be a death. Ed's still free, still breathing. This is a chance for him to start fresh.

So he proposes the talent show. The crew loves the idea, and not just because Ed suggested it. They immediately start planning things, chattering about what they want to do, and Ed thinks, yeah — this could be something.

It's not like any ship Ed's ever sailed on before. A lot of pirates Ed knows are good guys who've never gotten a fair shake in life and have made that everyone else's problem, including their own crewmates. Ed gets it — he's been there, before even his own rage and misery started to feel routine.

But in this little bubble Stede created, that the crew's maintained even without him around, it doesn't have to be like that. They can do something different if they want to. They can have each other's backs all the time, even when they're just hanging out.

So — talent show.

Izzy tries to put a stop to it. He insults Ed, taunts him with the drawing from Stede's book, mocks Ed's (*Stede's*) fancy robe and how Ed misses Stede like he'd miss an arm that got cut off.

And Ed — he's *tired*, man. So tired that he considers just giving in and letting Izzy have what he wants, the violence and the retribution for acting like Ed's the one in the wrong here, like Ed's the one who left someone on a dock all night and never showed up.

Then, once that's done, he can finish cleaning up and maybe have a nap in Stede's bed for a change, now that he's taken down the blanket fort.

But if he really wants to change, it has to start here, with him and Izzy. With Izzy listening to him, *really* listening, and not being afraid of Ed changing. Not being so *afraid*, period. That caution's saved lives, but it's held them both back, and it's holding him back now.

"That's not Blackbeard," Ed says. "I'm Blackbeard. And I'm Edward, too. You used to call me that — you remember that, don't you?"

Izzy scowls. "That was before Bonnet got in your head."

"No, it wasn't." Ed gathers his frustration in, holds it around himself like a second robe so he won't lash out. "It's Edward, or Ed, until I say otherwise. Understood?"

There's a stubborn huff from Izzy. "Is this really what you want? Prancing around in front of your crew? You don't even have a weapon on you. Fuck, I'm trying to *help* you."

Ed reaches into his boot and pulls out a hidden dagger. It clatters on the floor as he tosses it aside. "You still don't get it. I'm still me — always have been. I just want to be this, too. C'mon, Iz."

Izzy stares him down. Ed holds his gaze until it's followed by a short nod. "Fine."

"Good," Ed says. "And Izzy?"

"Yes, boss?"

Ed grins. "Come up with a good act for the talent show, will you?"



They hold the show early one evening after dropping anchor, the open ocean all around them and the breeze carrying their dulcet tones. It's a really, really good night, even with Stede's absence felt in every corner.

A few days later, Frenchie comes to him with an idea of his own.

"There are other ways to make money out here besides piracy and prostitution, you know," Frenchie says. "We could go legit."

The academy, the kiss, Stede gazing at him from his bunk. The empty dock and the early morning air, cold on Ed's face and hands.

Ed drags himself back and looks up at Frenchie from the barrel he's sitting on. "You mean, privateering?"

"Ah — no, sorry." Frenchie grimaces. "Not privateering. Certainly not. But the talent show thing — most of us were like, really good, right? Like, even Izzy can sing a little."

"Where's this going?" Ed asks.

"Yeah, so," Frenchie continues, "the idea is, we practice up a bit, keep doing pirating things in the meantime, and then when we're ready —"

He motions to Black Pete and Fang, who unfurl a banner made out of a discarded piece of sailcloth. The words are in Lucius' hand, but they clearly all contributed to the stars, swirls, and paint drips. Ed recognizes the name of the ship done in bold lettering.

"What's that say?"

"The *Revenge* Traveling Performance Company!" Pete announces. "So we can share our talents with the world, man!"

Fang beams. "And we'll get people to pay for it, too, so we don't have to raid anymore if you don't want to, boss."

Ed is honestly touched. It's clear they've put a lot of thought into this scheme already, and into accommodating him not wanting to get back into the swing of things just yet. The more he thinks about it, the more it invigorates him.

"This is brilliant!" he exclaims. "Honestly. I mean, we've all seen how good you all are with an audience, and — oh, should I go up in the harness? I want to get up in the harness. People love that."

"That's great, yeah." Frenchie hesitates. "Do you think — do you think Captain Bonnet would like this?"

Behind him, Pete and Fang are making frantic shushing noises that dissolve into groans the moment Stede's name comes out.

"You know what?" Ed says, ignoring the sharp stab of pain that comes with thinking about Stede, and whatever he wants that isn't Ed. "I think he'd be just as excited as I am. How do we get started?"

It really is a shame Stede's not here, Ed thinks as he consults with the three of them and watches them run off to share the plan with everyone else. He'd be so fucking proud of them.



When Stede finally catches up with the *Revenge*, weeks after he set out from Bridgetown, he hardly recognizes the ship he left behind.

It's really only luck that he finds them at all. Having completely run out of supplies, he's forced to make port for the day instead of continuing his search. As he ties up his dinghy, he finds everyone in quite a tizzy over a new performance troupe, supposed to turn up that very night if the rumors are to be believed.

Stede hasn't seen that done on a ship before. He decides to stick around.

He spends the day bartering in the market and taking a simple meal at a nearby inn. When night falls, Stede joins everyone else in drifting back toward the dock.

As it turns out, he needn't have bothered with the supply run. The ship that sails into the harbor, billowing dramatically with the wind at her back, has everything he needs.

Stede can't help but stare, eyes wide, as his crew pulls the *Revenge* to a sideways stop so the length of her faces the waiting crowd, a little ways out. Buttons and Oluwande lower the anchor while Roach lights candles, set behind glass baubles to give the whole ship a soft glow.

When everything's ready, Frenchie steps onto the deck with sweeping ease.

"Greetings, ladies, gents, and everyone in between!" he calls out. "We are the crew of the *Revenge*, performing across the North Sea, sailing into *your* port this very evening!"

He extends one arm to draw the audience in. "Get ready to be delighted, amazed, and even emotionally compromised by the sheer talent of our fabulous entertainers!

"Now, tips *are* appreciated, and you can see my man Wee John here to give generously before and after the show." Frenchie points at Wee John, now approaching land in a ribbon–festooned dinghy. "If you forget, don't worry; Jim's been practicing their knife throwing!"

Frenchie laughs to himself. So does Stede, and, luckily, so do a few other people around him, nervous titters passing in waves through the crowd.

"I'm just kidding," Frenchie says with a wink ostentatious enough to be seen even as far back as Stede is. "Jim doesn't need any practice. Let's start the show!"



Before the show's even over, Stede's moved to tears. It's clear how hard they've worked on this, how excited they are to show off their skills.

Frenchie accompanies himself on the lute for two songs Stede's never heard before. Jim does indeed show off their knife throwing accuracy; the increasingly smaller fruits serving as their targets are then juggled by Roach, who only drops one as he dices them in midair.

The Swede shares his operatic talents, Oluwande and Pete respectively play the drums and the tambourine, Izzy does something strange and upsetting that involves swallowing a rapier, and Wee John recites the opening soliloquy from *Hamlet* with word–perfect accuracy.

Lucius is a constant at the side of the stage area, cueing them from his notebook and smiling at each of them as they finish their acts.

And then, there is Edward.

A hush falls over the audience as Ed ascends over the deck in his harness, sparklers and fog going off behind him to enhance his terrifying beauty. With ground support from Fang and Ivan, he's drawn across the rigging to the middle of the deck.

Stede watches, spellbound, as Ed performs a stunning acrobatics act, using the leverage of the ropes and the strength of his own body to propel himself into flips and spins, silver—black hair streaming out around him, culminating in a dizzying fall that stops just before Ed crashes to the deck.

Stede's never seen anything like it — certainly not from Ed, could he do that all this *time*?

He's the first to start cheering and the loudest, so much that he barely notices when Frenchie ends the show and thanks everyone for coming.

The crowd drifts away around him — quite a few of them make contributions, which he's happy to see — until it's just Stede, standing there, watching his crew clap each other on the back. His gaze is continually drawn back

to Ed, now being helped out of his harness.

Their eyes meet across the water just as the wind picks up. Stede has a sudden, wild urge to jump into the sea, to *swim* to Ed, before he remembers that he has a boat and before Wee John calls out to him from the dock.

"Captain?" John squints at him. "That you?"

"Hello!" As he walks over, Stede's overcome with emotion again. He's missed his crew so terribly. "Oh, it's so good to see you all again."

John offers him a ride, but Stede's dinghy is still tied up, so he throws his supplies in and they're off.

"Captain Ed hasn't been doing great," John confesses on the way, as they row next to each other. "The whole thing's been really helping to get his mind off... everything. But he'll be *really* glad you're back."

When they arrive, Stede sees that for himself. Ed's leaning over the side of the ship, flanked by everyone else, a tentative smile on his face. Even from here, Stede can tell that Ed has tears in his eyes.

"Stede?" Ed calls out.

"Hello, everyone!" Answering tears prick at Stede's eyes. "Hello, Ed. Permission to come aboard?"

He's barely gotten the words out before Ed dives off the ship, following the same instinct Stede barely resisted. His dinghy tips alarmingly as Ed clambers in.

"Permission granted," Ed breathes out. "Fuck, it's really you."

"It is," Stede confirms. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

"We'll talk it through *later*," Ed says, drawing closer to him and cupping Stede's cheek.

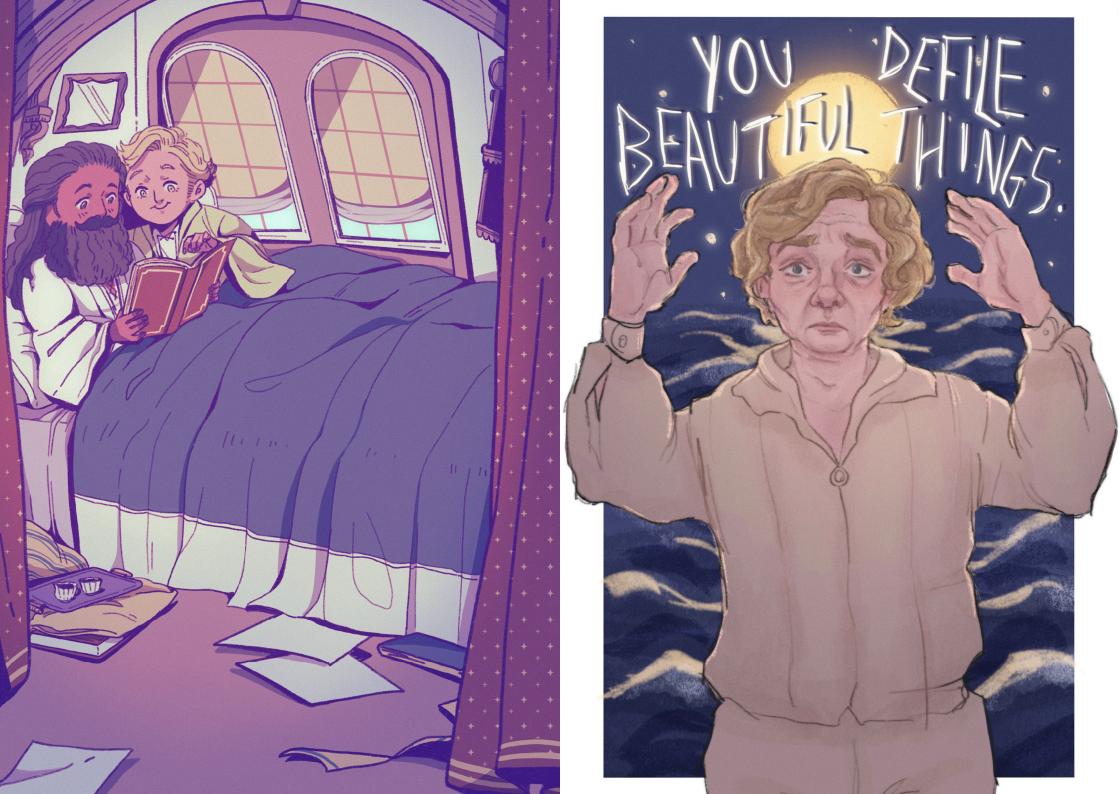
They lean in at the same time. Ed's lips taste like sea water and night air, and Stede clings to his wet jacket as they kiss, wanting to pull Ed into his lap and never let him go.

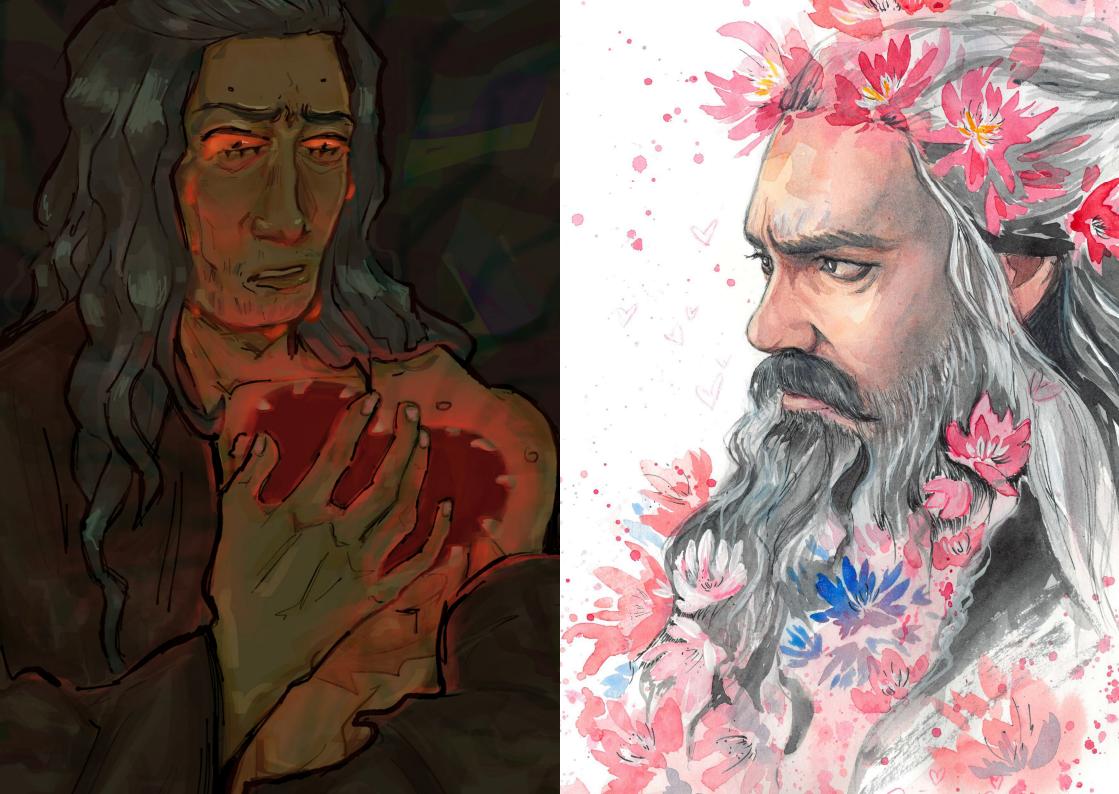
"Just one question," Ed murmurs when they break apart.

Stede cups his hand around the back of Ed's neck, tangles his fingers in Ed's hair. "Anything."

The moonlight above them illuminates the gleam of mischief in Ed's eyes. "What sort of special talents do you have?"



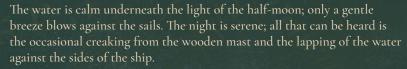




In the quiet of the night

NIGHTWORLDLOVE

no content warnings apply



Peaceful; that is the best word Stede can come up with to describe tonight. Though in reality, it is *far* from peaceful, Stede knows they have a long way to go to achieve that. The tension on deck still lingers and they are definitely not safe from possible danger. But just for tonight, Stede likes to pretend that there's nothing to worry about, to just *be*.

The wind caresses his face and Stede closes his eyes, the corners of his lips curl up to form a smile. Despite everything, he's happy. Although he and Edward are reunited, he knows they can't simply continue on from where they left off. Damage has been done, which needs healing and time. Still, Stede is hopeful and optimistic.

When he hears footsteps approach closer his instinct is to turn his head to see who it is, but by the sound of those footsteps he can tell.

Neither of them speak at first; they stand next to each other while leaning against the mast and staring ahead. There is so much Stede wants to say, but he isn't quite sure where to start. In all honesty, he isn't sure there's anything he *can* say. His thoughts are interrupted when he feels a hand taking his.

As they look at each other Stede feels many things at once; happiness, relief, love, guilt, shame, fear. As gentle as tonight's breeze is, there's a whirlwind inside of him. When he finally parts his lips to speak, a finger is pressed against them.

"Don't you dare apologize again," Edward says while shaking his head.

Stede nods, but Edward's finger remains on his lips regardless. He feels the tip of Edward's finger move across his bottom lip ever so slowly, as if mapping it in his mind. Stede doesn't say anything, instead he watches how Edward's eyes are focused on his lips.

Chills spread through Stede's skin in response to the soft and tender touch, which is something he isn't quite used to. Before he and Edward met, he had never been touched in a way that caused such a pleasant frenzy in his stomach, causing his heart to flutter with delight.

Edward's touch pulls Stede out of the depths of thought and grounds him in the present, hyper-aware of the gentle brush of Edward's finger against his lip. The tingling sensation it leaves behind is exhilarating and has Stede longing for more.

His eyes flutter shut when he feels Edward slip his hand from his own only to move it to his lower back. Above all Stede feels safe, he feels *free*. It takes him by surprise when tears start welling up and begin to escape from the corners of his closed eyes.

"Stede, what's wr—?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ed. Quite the opposite," Stede interrupts, opening his eyes to look at Edward. He can see those dark eyebrows creased with worry, but they relax slowly as he smiles.

"But you're crying?"

Stede can't help but chuckle at that. "Yes. Yes, I am," he whispers as Edward gently wipes away the tears from his cheeks. "I guess they're happy tears." When Edward's puzzled expression remains, Stede tries to think of how to best explain it. "Have you ever felt so overcome with emotion that you simply can't hold it in?"

Edward turns his head ever so slightly to stare into the distance, undoubtedly going through decades of memories. Once again the only sounds are those of the lapping waves, the creaking of the mast and the rustling of the sails.

"I... I think so..." Edward mutters.

"Sometimes your emotions just get so overwhelming that you can't help but cry, or laugh, maybe even dance." He rests his cheek into Edward's hand and lets out a soft sigh.

A little bit of time passes and they stand there, underneath the starry sky, in each other's embrace. There's a comfort in the quiet of the night, feeling each other's heartbeats as their bodies touch. Despite everything they're here, together.

"Are you cold?" Edward asks, breaking the silence.

Stede opens his eyes and lifts his head from Edward's chest. "What?" He has no idea where the question comes from.

The soft chuckle Edward lets out fills Stede's chest with warmth. "You're shivering, man," Edward says as he rubs Stede's back.

"Oh..." Stede didn't protest in the slightest when Edward applied some pressure to his lower back, leading both of them towards the captain's quarters.

The entire way neither of them speak a word, but they exchange glances every now and then in the dim light.

As soon as the door shuts behind them Edward turns around to face Stede, one hand resting on Stede's waist and the other against his cheek. Again, the touch is soft and gentle. Stede leans into the touch and closes his eyes, focusing on the sensation of Edward's warm skin against his own.

For a moment he fears that this is all a dream he is about to wake up from, but as time passes he doesn't. When he opens his eyes, Edward is still in front of him, even closer than before. So close, in fact, that he can feel his warm breath against his skin. His heartbeat quickens, though not because of fear. Maybe he *should* be afraid, considering everything that has happened, but he doesn't feel scared. Even as his back is pressed against the door, with Edward in front of him, he still feels safe; maybe even safer than he has ever felt before. It's odd, but Stede can't care to worry about it.

"I think I understand now," Edward whispers. The corners of his lips curl up into a soft smile as his eyes meet Stede's.

He notices that Edward's eyes are glassy, but there's no sign of sadness. Stede smiles too as he pulls Edward closer, pressing their bodies against each other.

"Yeah?" he asks, to which Edward nods. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Instead of replying, Edward leans in even closer. Their lips nearly brush as he whispers, "I'd really like to kiss you."

It feels like a strong current courses through his body, like a dozen butterflies are released into his abdomen. The effect those few words have on Stede is

more than he could have ever bargained for. This time, *he* closes the distance between them and presses his lips against Edward's.

It starts off soft and slow. The world around them disappears into the background, blurry and out of focus.

They break apart to simply to catch their breaths, and Stede caresses Edward's stubbled cheeks. His hands move to rest on Edward's shoulders, then proceed to slowly move underneath the long gray hair, his arms now around Edward's neck.

"I missed you," Edward whispers while softly caressing Stede's cheek, "I'm so glad you came back." Barely a second passes before he kisses Stede again, a little more deeply this time.

When Edward breaks the kiss and their eyes meet, Stede wears a soft smile and plays with Edward's hair. The light and fluttery feelings in his chest intensify when he watches Edward's eyes close as his fingers rake through his long, dark gray hair.

"Me too, Ed," Stede whispers, causing Edward's eyes to flutter open again. It's quiet in a way that soothes them, it's a comfortable silence.

Stede's eyes shift when Edward takes his hand and leads him to the sofa. Edward takes a seat with his back against the armrest and invites Stede to sit. All Stede can think of is that Edward looks incredibly handsome as he sits there, his hair draped past his collarbones and hand outstretched towards Stede.

Before sitting down, Stede takes off his shoes. When he looks up and finds a flustered Edward kicking off his boots, he can't help but chuckle. He sits down with his back against Edward's chest and closes his eyes for a few moments, feeling Edward's arms wrap around him. With his fingertips he traces the outlines of Edward's tattoos, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

"So," Edward says, just loud enough for Stede to hear. "Where to, Captain?"

The movement of Stede's fingers stops. "Ed?" The confusion is clearly audible in the tone of his voice.

"Tell me, Stede." Edward leans closer until his breath caresses the shell of Stede's ear. "Where are we off to?"

It requires some effort for Stede to swallow as he thinks about the question. "I–I'm not sure..."

"That's alright, nothing's set in stone." His hand finds one of Stede's and their fingers intertwine. "Just so you know, wherever you go, I'll go."

This causes Stede to turn his head in an attempt to look at Edward, trying to read his expression. If Edward's messing with him, Stede can't tell. "You would?"

"Yeah, why's that so surprising?"

"Well —" Stede doesn't finish the sentence, he's so overwhelmed. But he doesn't get the chance to spiral, as Edward starts to speak again.

"Stede, I meant what I said. You make Ed happy." Edward's hand gently squeezes Stede's hand for emphasis, "So yes, I would and I will."

The warmth in Stede's chest grows, spreading throughout his body like a gentle flame. Like a cozy fire on cold and stormy nights, offering comfort. A feeling he had unknowingly yearned for, not realizing until very recently.

Without letting go of his hand, Stede turns around to face Edward properly, despite how scary it is. "Ed... I'm not sure where to, but I'd like to find out... Together, if you'd be oka — "

"Absolutely," Edward says before Stede can even finish, without a hint of hesitation. Just like the lack of hesitation when he cups Stede's face with his hands and kisses him.

There's a whirlwind of warmth and tingles that flows through Stede's body, it's a rush he's come to enjoy and he is now rather fond of. Kissing Edward is something he enjoys even more so, especially with the way Edward holds him as they kiss. It feels safe and it feels like... Home.

This time, when tears trickle down Stede's face, Edward isn't confused. He tenderly kisses the tears away with a smile and his arms wrapped around Stede.

"I get it now," Edward whispers as a tear escapes the corner of one of his eyes.

Stede returns the favor and kisses away the tear from Edward's cheek. "I'm so glad, Ed," he whispers and snuggles against Edward's body. Wherever they go and whatever they'll face, Stede knows it will be with Edward by his side and that's enough for him.









THE JOURNEY

SAM H.

no content warnings apply

THE AWAKENING

my earliest memory of childhood:
rowing across a lake, rocks splashing around my canoe;
the sky rained disapproval around me.
row faster! faster! faster!
the chorus of unrelenting children chants.
crybaby! baby! baby!
even the sun frowned down on me.
huffing through tight breaths, golden curls bouncing;
my earliest fear of adulthood.

what can you do when your greatest fear is someone who loves you? tragedy dressed up into an inspirational origin story; easier, neater, to explain than the everlasting pain of watching destruction helplessly.

inside my heart, there is a monster chewing away at my veins. when did i lose my humanity?

(i think it was the day i realized nothing could be worse than losing the only person who truly loved me.) the dull monotony of domestic life scrapes rhythms inside my empty skull — every dinner at the elongated table, stretched across the finest carpet from the corners of the world, forces me to confront that picture-perfect realities can be low-level recurring nightmares haunting my waking days. thank you, homemaking, for my unadulterated reckoning

THE LEAF

deep down, i've always wanted an escape from order — constricting. as i pack my bags, a brief moment of regret settles in my stomach; what if i am making a mistake?

but i consider how the ocean has arms wider than this house's suffocating walls that squeeze the hope out of my body, wringing me dry. so, i pick up my bags and walk out the door; perhaps i will return one day if the wind carries me home.



treasure hunting in rotting pars and dry plains; the artist holds no hope.
"you won't find anything here."
regardless, i reach into the pit of vipers —
yank out a dulling golden dagger.
it fits perfectly in my smooth palm:
beauty is in the eye of the beholder.



THE DIV

through the centuries i have lived inside mere decades of my legacy i have never met someone as brightly hopeful, yet burdensomely haunted as you, reckless — stupidly brave — sailor. your tactics strike no fear, inciting indignation from others. but i, wisened soldier, grin at your quivering smile, newfound admiration.

immortality might not be all that hard if i could spend it with you.

*

lovers who offer to tear themselves apart for each other are doomed; instead, i offer to build this empire in our names, for love is the act of creating something beautiful, not destroying something broken.



THE RESURFACING

before airplanes were invented, i was the first to jump out of the plane, tumbling headfirst to Earth, a parachute billowing above my head; the pilot sat in his cockpit, unaware of my unexpected departure — all i've ever known is to run from freedom.



in my art, my husband sees nothing but failure in the careful brushstrokes. you're not lonely, he protests. you have me. what more could you possibly need?

what i want is a woman who loves my paintings — and me — more than any man could ever understand; for he will only see through oil, the glass imitation of my body; she will see me.



THE DROWNING

bring back the moonlight conversations and piles of silk we buried ourselves under to read fairytales in the flickering candlelight. every breath threatened to snuff it out, leave lingering wisps of smoke and melting wax — it still burns when i touch it, curious to see how sharply it hurts.

strange, how i can't handle the sting of the smoldering remains of the candle yet i begged you to drive a sword into my gut just to prove my love for you. i could only ever handle the pain of loving, never that of leaving.



bare bones; all you left me with resides in this irreversible longing for warm flesh. faithful devotion, substituted with the company of unwilling soldiers caught in the battle's crossfire. the only person who could quell this god-fearing monster (lodged between my stony ribs): gone and long forgotten. i can only wait for it to return, consume my soul's remaining fragments — gobble it up and walk away, still starving for more pain





No Greater Revenge than Bliss

JULIET R.

no content warnings apply.

At my lighthouse, I'll be watching when The serpent finally grasps your neck, And the beacon opens flame In spite of moonlight To reveal you're just the same.

But I know, madly, in the dusk When siren song Is but a dull hum, all that lures you is silence, A life without violence.

By some act of grace from the sea
I've reeled you in, my kraken, my fire
With all your wiles and smoky, glowing eyes,
Were you meant to stumble upon this —
Porcelain longing to be chipped?

In a whirl of ravenous *you*Even kelp bends at your will,
Lies forever silent and shivering
But for the shrill declaration of awe
In the face of ferocious loveliness.

Bound by the blade, my admiration runs
Deeper even than the wound,
Which was drawn by your word.
For you make waking up feel like a resurrection,
And each breath of yours reminds me that this is real.

Only we know the tenderness of the high sea;
The warmth of a gaze in place of talons;
The sweetness of tea over a story you cannot
Yet understand, but by my hand
Your pen will flow as blood did in a time before.

Come now, dance with me on the deck Under lanterns held by dearest friends, And the freedom of laughter that knows no end. There will be no fear set in our sails. For there is no greater revenge than bliss.

As starlight spills over the rocks
I am marooned but at little cost.
For I bear witness to a metamorphosis,
A symphony in unknown tongues —
The unravelling of the terror they knew.

Madly, in the dusk, I have returned To the softness of silk; To my ragged-edged love For in heart and mind, I had never quite left.







WIND LIKE A WHETTED KNIFE

WRITING BY ELLIOT SONDER, ART BY BIRDIE

no content warnings apply



Jim dies with the soft whisper of a knife — shh, shh — and the punch of freezing saltwater hitting their body all at once. They are granted the briefest last glimpse of the dark ocean, frothy above them, bubbles of their breath pop popping staccato as they die. Above, the sky is teal, and an orange slips out of their pocket to bob to the surface. Orange on teal — the last moments of Jim Jimenez before death wraps them in her warm embrace, to welcome her wayward servant home.



Jim wakes to the taste of citrus.

They've been trained to understand situations in a matter of moments, no matter how tired, no matter how injured, no matter how *dead*. Because if they don't catalogue everything and understand it, they will be dead again.

The scene coalesces like this: air perfumed with orange, thick and burning as Jim breathes, their vision obscured by something not quite solid, diffuse light sneaking its way in, soft, bouncing loam beneath them, rich fertile soil. They blink, and pain shoots into their eyes. With a hiss they're sitting up, already groping for their knives and finding none.

There is a quiet avalanche of orange peels as Jim rises.

They fucking hate the symbolism of it all, waking in the land of the dead buried under a pile of orange peels. They hate a lot of symbolism, especially because they know too much of it. Stede does this fucking annoying thing where he tries to explain what his stories mean, what the moral lesson is. Jim doesn't care. Jim likes *simple*.

Where the *fuck* are their knives? And why does —

They cough out a black button from under their tongue. A familiar black button from the man whose namesake it is. It lands wet in their waiting palm, gleaming in the strange light of this place they are, washed out and yellow.

What a pathetic offering to the ferryman. They're going to strangle Buttons with his own shirt whenever the man gets down here, that they promise. And Blackbeard? Blackbeard they're going to slice into ribbons, slowly and methodically. He may have become an ass, a monster, *The Kraken*, without Stede there, but none of that was anywhere near as bad as this, this disrespect, this single basic affordance to every pirate – a coin to pay, a coin for the dead – that Jim has been so strangely denied.

And to be stripped of their knives — they remember dying, the strangle and burn as life left their body, they had their knives with them then. So, who has played this cosmic prank?

As they look around them they come to realize that the land of the dead is an orchard of oranges. The ripest and juiciest they have ever seen, trees with branches straining under the weight of the fruit.

Ugh.

The trees spread far, far, down past the dip of the horizon until Jim has to strain to see them, all in perfect straight rows.

A glance. Their eyes widen. Oluwande.

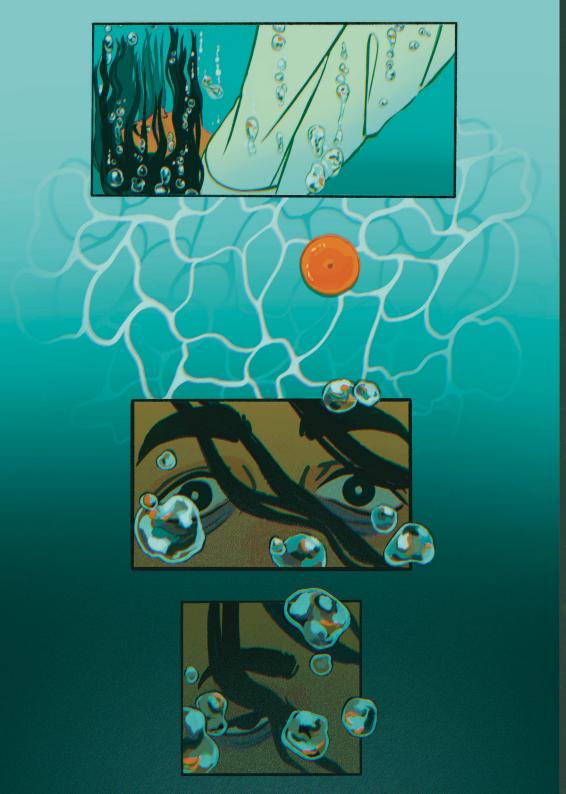
But when they run to where he was standing, there is nothing but slow currents of air, lazy against their ankles. It is a horror. It is a relief. They feel the tears welling up. They can't remember if their only love is dead too.

They don't have to suffer long; a small mercy falls from the tree, a petrified orange that knocks hard against them, tipping across the brim of their hat, which flutters to the ground, and rolls away.

It hits Jim all at once.

They've been dead much longer than they thought, they've already paid the ferryman, they're stuck in some fucked up symbolic limbo and they don't know what it means, what they need to do to die properly. They remember having this thought, this realization before. Remember thinking they see Oluwande.

Because as it turns out, everyone was wrong about death. The white men, the nun that raised them, Fang (*dogs don't go to their own Heaven after all*), all of them. (They feel some satisfaction to know that the only hell Blackbeard will get is one of his own making, because those are the worst hells of all.)



Death had taken Jim by the hand after they paid, stole them from the ferryman and had taken them to this private hell.

Death had smoothed back their hair, and kissed them, soft on the brow. "I am sorry, little one," and for once Jim hadn't felt condescended to, merely warm where she touched, "but you have killed. No matter how justified." She laughed a little at that, a sound buried deep in Jim's memory, the wet squelch of unpicked oranges, stepped on while playing pirates.

"It will not be forever, my child. You will pay off the debt of the lives you took, and then I will come back for you, for your eternity." She disappeared with the ringing of metal driven deep into wood, and Jim *ached* without quite knowing why.

The simple answer was that they had to tend the orchard until the bastards that killed their family died properly, in some sick form of penance. For a while, it was fine. Pick oranges, dig holes, prune trees, work and work and work, until their fingers bled and their back was after and their head hurt. It was the moments between, the moments of rest they'd be smacked into, collapsing and then forced to wake up again in a pile of orange peels, forgetting and mind being ripped with new remembrance at the whims of this purgatory. Death began to chip at them, bit by bit, turning them ghostly and empty, a purgatorial husk. Because there is no Oluwande to share oranges with, there is no warm body waiting for them in their bed, no one to turn to and have their shitty jokes always land.

They lean down to pick up their hat, and the orange at their feet, and try to remember Olu's laugh, grown distant in their mind.

And that is when it happens.

Oluwande is there. It feels different this time, like this spectre doesn't belong, like he's punched a hole in the fabric of this place and stepped through. His earring glints in the muted light.

Just out of reach to Jim, Oluwande beckons for them to follow, with a slow careful crook of his fingers.

The orange drips juice down Jim's hand; they didn't notice that they were squeezing it. *Oluwande was not supposed to die.* He was supposed to live a long life without Jim. And now he is getting further and further away, walking with purpose, as though certain Jim will follow with just the single beckon of his fingers.

They squeeze harder, the flesh of the orange squishing in their fingers, Oluwande was not supposed to come after them, they were a killer, an assassin, a monster, a danger. He was perfect, and he was *good*, and he wasn't supposed to come for

them. Jim was the one that followed, that tracked the goodness they didn't deserve, that held it close as they dared. And now Oluwande was here.

His back, broad and warm, recedes slowly through the trees, certain Jim will follow.

"Damnit Olu!" Jim screams, and the orange leaves their hand before they even realize they have thrown it. It leaves a sticky wet spot, right between Oluwande's strong shoulders where it hits them on the back.

He flinches and oh so nearly turns around. He should yell at Jim, should tell them how cruel that was, should make them better with mere words, the way no one else has ever made Jim *good*. But he doesn't. There is a sad set to his shoulders, and Oluwande walks away, as if with total faith that Jim will follow.

It's more fucking symbolism, more stories that other people have written for Jim. They know how this one goes. A lover goes to the land of the dead and begs to bring their love back. They make it almost all the way and then the tragedy plays out. Over and over. There is no other end to the story.

Fucken. Bloody. Hell.

They run anyways. They've done more impossible things than proving the world wrong. Oluwande is always ahead of them, just out of reach, no matter how hard they run behind him, no matter how their lungs burn or their legs ache.

The trees twist, perfect rows running watercolor past Jim's vision until, without warning, they're gone. Jim trips and eats dirt, cutting open their chin when they hit the ground. They watch Olu shake, but he does not turn around, no matter how much Jim wishes he would, wishes he would kiss their newly scraped palms with the holy reverence he reserves for all their injuries.

The sky is strange and yellow, and there's water, lapping at the rocky edge of the clearing the orchard has suddenly become. By the time Jim pushes their way to their feet, Oluwande is up to his hips in the water, leading doggedly forward.

Behind them the orchard yawns, terrible but familiar. In front, their only love, whom they must watch drown, feet rooted to the earth. Jim aches worse than anything for Oluwande to look at them, to see the reassurance in his eyes, the place where his jugular pulses under his skin, wants that smile, the one that promises everything will be alright and *means it*. Jim aches to see the man that never tries to define them, wants some definition now, some shape that will prove to them that this is the real Oluwande.

Jim remembers how this story ends; it is the fate of all lovers to end in tragedy, the mark of that love. How could you not look, not make sure when your lover

calls out so mournfully? They know how the story goes, and yet they cannot stop the plaintive sound that escapes their mouth.

"Oluwande, wait." They speak their doom, ready for the inevitable.

Oluwande hesitates, shoulders rising, scrunching, muscles of his neck tensing as though about to rotate...

He does not turn around.

The water takes him in a moment, swallows him up to his neck in her cool embrace. There is only one choice for Jim; follow or not. The answer has always been obvious.

Where you go, I'll follow, Jim says.

Oluwande never makes it hard for Jim, never goes where they can't follow.

Perhaps this is still a trick. Perhaps this is Death's final game.

Jim takes the knife's edge chance, plunging into the cool water. It laps at their ankles, then slowly, their knees, they're walking into the thing that killed them, directly after their love, who will not turn around. The water hits like a burn, chills their heart into the screaming knell of church bells. They are cold with the remembrance of their death. And still Oluwande walks ahead of them.

The water is up to their neck, and they reach out for Oluwande, fingers brushing near electrically against his skin, he's so close Jim can swear they can feel his body heat in the water. And still he walks. Plunges under the dark sea. Jim does not want to watch their love drown.

They take a breath.

And do the only thing they could ever really do for Oluwande: follow him into the dark.



Jim lives again to a lungful of salt.

Oluwande has them in his arms immediately, bobbing in the slightly too deep sea, wrapping their arms about his neck and kissing them with a ferocity rarely seen. Oluwande is their equal and opposite, their voice, their heart, their gentleness.

In that moment he is their passion, their fire, their *life*. Every inch of his skin on theirs burns exquisitely. The sensations come roaring back, one by one, they're

cold, they're tired, they're hungry, they're thirsty as hell. And Oluwande wipes them all away.

He kisses them hard, wipes the salt tears from their face, and when they finally lean back for air, he throws his head back and laughs, deep and throaty, plopping Jim's soaked hat back on their head.

Distantly, Jim can hear the sounds of the crew of the *Revenge*, but they don't matter in that moment. All that matters is the thrum of blood heating through their veins, the roar of the sea in their ears and the litany in their mind: *I am alive*, *I am alive*, *I am alive with my love*.

They're back home. They're alive

They follow Oluwande to the ship without regret.







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